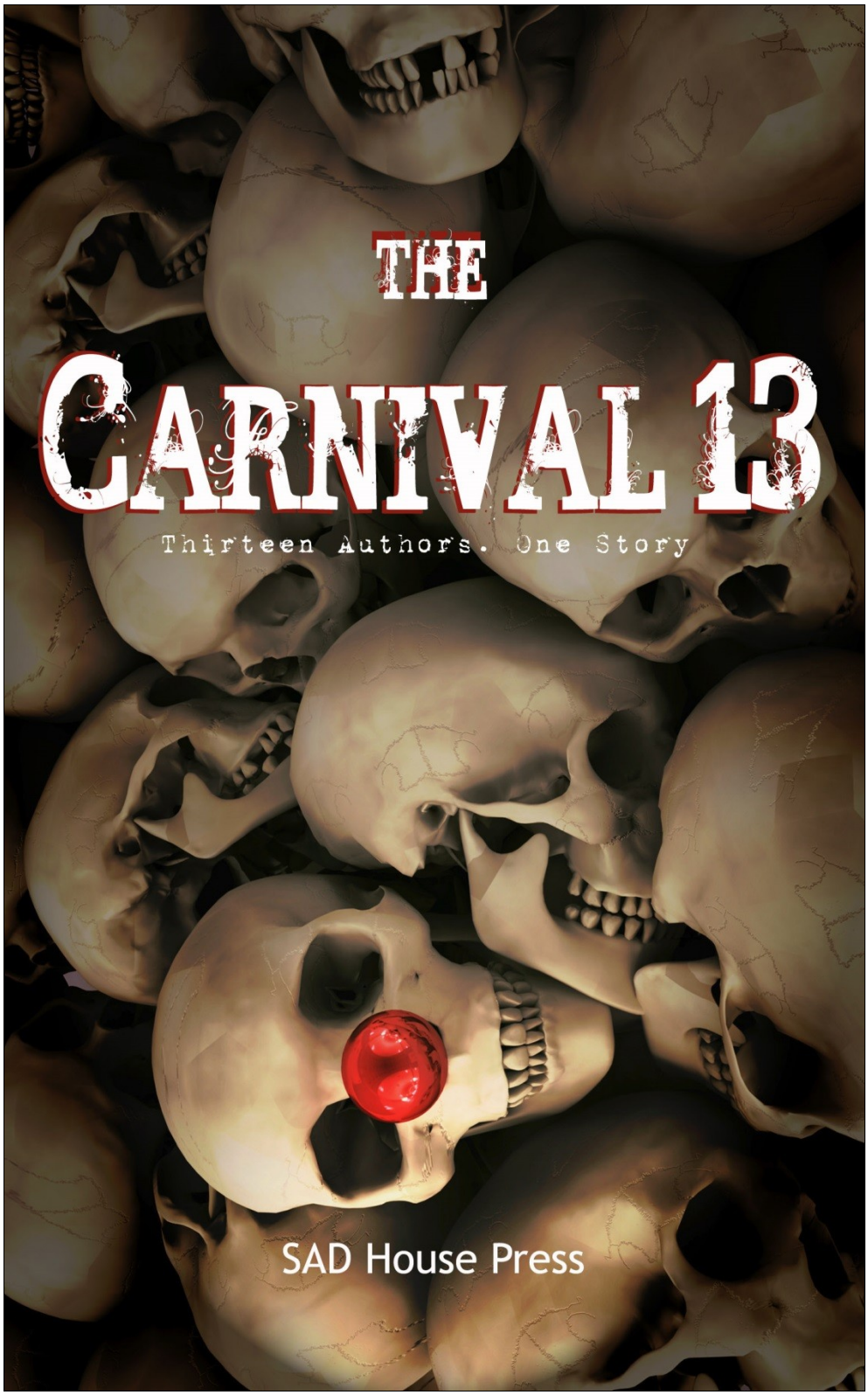
THE
CARNIVAL 13
Thirteen Authors. One Story
SAD House Press

The Carnival 13

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Prologue

John Everson

The mirror ate his face.

Kelly Kegan bent closer to the toboggan slide curve of the funhouse mirror and laughed as his eyes contracted from a ridiculous six inches to a miniscule centimeter tall, lodging on top of his equally shrunken nostrils while his mouth remained enormous. He tilted his head and couldn't help but laugh out loud when one of his ears turned into something as elongated as a gremlin's.

He stepped back then, and looked around. He'd stopped at the carnival after work on a lark, drawn by the colored lights and slightly off-key calliope music like a moth to flame. He loved this shit. Popcorn and peanuts, tilt-a-whirls and funhouses and "break the plate with a baseball" games... Carnivals were like walking out of the real world into some strange travelling slice of the past. They reeked of a day when life was simpler, and you could stare at yourself in a trick mirror and cut loose without embarrassment.

And that's exactly what he had done. Kelly had bought his $5 red ticket from the creepy clown at the gate, instantly dropping a couple more bucks on a carton of buttery popcorn (he'd be back for the cotton candy, he knew it!) and wandered past the "Test Your Skill, Try Your Luck" row of BB gun and basketball games, until he'd arrived at the Funhouse and its twisted Hall of Mirrors.

It was still light out, and a Thursday night, so the place wasn't packed yet. The rides were running, cars on precipitous tracks echoing clack-clack-clack in the distance, but when Kelly had entered the Hall of Mirrors, it was like walking into the dusty silence of a crypt. He didn't care. He set the popcorn on the ground in the dark, quiet hallway, and gyrated around like an idiot, making faces that stretched into outlandish caricatures of himself.

When he leaned forward and his belt buckle suddenly got about a foot long, Kelly had an idea.

A sophomoric idea, but one he had to go through with.

He turned sideways, watching his torso shrink and grow in the mirror before him. He flexed his bicep, a task he often did, even if nobody had asked him to. His arm remained python-like in the reflection, though this time it appeared to have eaten a small pig. Kelly marveled at himself, "You're a beast, an animal!" He cackled as he threw a few mock punches at himself. "The ladies all want to see you and the men all want to be you, baby."

"Ain't no man can handle this," he said as he flexed both of his guns. "Sure as hell ain't no freakshow wannabe can spook me, you hear that, freaks?" His reflection glared back at him with his last declaration. Unbeknownst to him, another glare pierced him from the darkness. His laughter grew louder with each exaggerated pose. It was so

entertaining that he didn't hear the slow, quiet footsteps behind him until he saw the feet in the mirror. Feet that suddenly planted themselves on either side of his own, yet looked to be five times the size of normal shoes. And not because of the distortion of the mirror either. They were not leather or blue or black. They were big, floppy and white.

Clown feet.

Kelly's eyes widened as his arms fell to his sides, but it was too late to run.

The face in the mirror that leaned over his shoulder was painted red and white. Just as his face had distorted while he fooled around earlier, an equally enormous set of teeth grew in the mirror, like a shadow puppet, fast and dangerous. A strangely elongated hand with pointed fingernails, painted glossy black, reached out. For a second, Kelly thought it was coming out of the mirror itself.

Kelly Kegan screamed.

Chapter One

John Everson

"I hate fuckin' carnivals," Brian said to a captive audience of clothes. They hung silently on their hangers, steadfastly refusing to comment. He absolutely did not want to go to the carnival. His clothes weren't going to argue. But that didn't change the fact he had to get dressed.

The colorful *B & S Enterprises* trucks had started unloading and setting up the tilt-a-whirl, Pirate's Delight, and Bumble-Bee Bop rides in the Blackburn Mall parking lot on Wednesday. Polly had seen them on her drive to work after school. As much as Brian hated the damn things, he wasn't going to let her see that, not after Polly had asked – with big *gosh honey please* eyes – if they could go. He was sure his face had lost all expression when he'd realized what she was begging for, but he'd gained control before letting her see his game-losing stare.

"Uh, sure!" he'd somehow managed. And Polly, excited about the idea of cotton candy and watergun balloon games, had managed to ignore or completely miss the look of frightened, anxious "*Oh God, please no!*" on her boyfriend's face for the second it had appeared.

He rolled his eyes in the silence of his room and pulled his *American Idiot* concert t-shirt from the hanger. Somehow it seemed appropriate.

Fifteen minutes later, he was forcing a smile on the doorstep of Polly's place. When she came to the door, light brown hair perfectly tousled over her shoulder, wearing a tight pink t-shirt and blue cut-off jean shorts, Brian's forced smile changed from false to full-on for-real. She looked delicious.

"Don't be too late," her mom called from inside the house.

Polly turned and flashed an "oh puh-leez" look behind her. "I won't," she promised. Then she took his elbow and pulled him toward the driveway. "C'mon," she said. "I want to get there before dark!"

Brian took another look at her glowing smile and even brighter eyes and decided that as much as he hated carnivals, this was going to be an amazing night.

***

The mall parking lot was already packed when they pulled in and were directed off the asphalt to an impromptu lot in the neighboring field. The carnival itself straddled both the asphalt and the long, normally empty grass to the west of the mall. It was the first real heat of summer, and everyone in town was ready for a party. The visiting carnival gave them a good excuse, and they didn't pass it up. It looked as if everyone in Blackburn had turned out. The buzz of the crowd was already loud above the festive music of the midway. Brian and Polly stood in a long line at the ticket counter for 10 minutes before a ticket-taker – oddly garbed in clown makeup, with pitch-black fingernails – snapped up their money and slapped down two generic red rectangles that said 'Ticket', proving they should have entrance.

"Can we get cotton candy?" Polly asked, as soon as they stepped past the ticket booth.

"Sure," Brian agreed, and led her across the asphalt to an electric pink cart just a few steps away. A man in a white coat and hat was busy swiping a cardboard cone around the inside of the glass cart, gathering up strands of spun sugar to create a hive of sweet cotton for someone waiting just on the other side of the window. The air around them throbbed, alive with tinkling bells, calliope music, and the screams and laughs of people diving and soaring not far away on one of the big oval rides that took you up into the air almost to the moon before suddenly dropping down to the earth in a pendulum arc that looked guaranteed to end in a crash to the pavement. Lights caught them, blinded them in hazy yellows, reds and blues and then were momentarily gone.

They were in the center of it all, and Brian knew that his trepidation, no, *alienation* about the carnival, was not going to find a receptive ear here. All around them people were having a blast.

They eventually made it to the concessions cart's window and as the white-clad man spun sugar onto a paper cone for his girlfriend, the hair on the back of Brian's neck stood up straight as a voice from behind yelled out, "Polly! What is *up*, girl?"

It was Francis Blellingfield. Brian knew that without looking.

There were some who speculated Francis was so well-known not because he was well-loved, but because his cumbersome name and irritatingly obnoxious personality were so hard to ignore. Flamboyant (the guy wore lime green jeans!), disturbingly friendly, if you had had to make a list of the most popular and most reviled seniors at Kilarney High School, he would have somehow managed to top both the "Best" and "Worst" lists. He ingratiated himself to as many people as he royally pissed off.

"Bri-boy!" Francis continued, moving right from Polly to him. That greeting was bad news. Brian wanted nothing more than to see Francis Blellingfield impaled on a fencepost. The guy was a twit. An idiot with a motorboat engine for a mouth. Who knew what he said, because he was constantly jabbering.

***

For a second, Brian daydreamed with enjoyment what the scene would be like if Francis *did* fall from a ledge to writhe and bleed out his life right in front of him.

"Damn," Brian would say as he walked past the spear-punctured Francis. "That last step is a doozy isn't it?"

For once, maybe Francis' mouth would be quieted.

***

His good dream was interrupted by a hand clapping his shoulder.

"How you doin' my man?"

Francis' thin, stupid-looking face suddenly pushed itself into his vision in a way Brian couldn't ignore. The guy looked like a freakin' bird.

"I'm OK," he said. Thankfully the cotton candy man handed him his mess of spun sugar then, and Brian could turn away to focus on paying the man. But behind him, he

heard Polly talking to Francis and his egghead friends. One of them – Mack Slewer – did belong to the football team, so he had to acknowledge that it wasn't *really* a gang of eggheads because Mack definitely didn't qualify for that club. He was more suited to be a card-carrying member of the neanderthal fraternity. Although, Polly seemed to act all jittery when the guy talked to her. Brian shook his head and dropped a $5 bill down on the cotton candy maker's cart. He didn't wait to see if the man took it, but instead turned to see what Polly was up to. Their date night seemed to be careening off the tracks.

She was talking to Francis. Another couple that Brian knew from school, friends of Francis, stood behind him, waiting. Clearly they were anxious to get moving, to enjoy the carnival. Brian decided to use the opportunity. He shoved a cone of spun pink sugar into Polly's hand, and then took her other one in his.

"Well," he began, looking at Francis. "It was great seeing you guys, but we're going to head…"

Polly interrupted. "Do you all want to join us? We were going to check out what's on the midway.

Terrence Radecki, a painfully tall thin senior with eyeglasses right out of a laboratory, agreed instantly, "It's always more fun with a group."

Brian thought otherwise. He thought it would be more fun with just himself and Polly. But that was clearly out of his hands.

"I'd suggest we hit the freakshow first," Francis said, instantly taking the lead. "If we head that way, past the Tilt-a-Whirl, I think it's over there."

As the group began to collectively move, Polly pressed closer to Brian and stretched to kiss him on the cheek. She whispered in his ear, "You don't mind, do you?"

Brian was no fool. He *absolutely* minded. But he forced a smile and looked at his girlfriend with his eyes torturously locked in a gaze of good humor, "No, it'll be fun."

He lied.

***

The music and screams of laughter (and fear, as the TidalWave cars dropped from 4 stories high to the ground) filled the night air as the group walked across the Carnival. Brian did a mental count. Aside from Polly and himself, they had picked up Mack; the jock's girlfriend Erin, a brunette cheerleader with a cupie doll smile with a laugh like a yapping dog; the pencilnecked Terrence and his equally egghead girlfriend Agnes Messer (whose plastic-framed glasses made her eyes look larger than her face could hold); Debbie Moyer, a mousy-looking friend of Agnes'; Brad Czernik, a computer nut (he was always talking about his home network, or what server he had found insanely easy to hack); and Brad's long-suffering, quietly smiling girlfriend Sandy.

They were ten.

Brian took a deep breath and counted them again. Ten.

He wanted the number to be 2.

Plural, but just barely.

Damnit.

***

Polly pulled a long strand of pink fuzz from the cotton candy and handed the paper cone back to Brian. All of the irritation he felt disappeared when he saw her smile. She had the most brilliant blue eyes, and when she was happy, the damn things were like neon. He couldn't resist looking at her. Staring at the amazing beauty of her face.

Brian loved that. He loved *her*. He hadn't told her yet, but it was true. His body literally shivered sometimes when he thought about her. And he never *stopped* thinking about her. Imagining her voice telling him - well, anything. She was funny and smart and ironic and there was nothing he would rather hear than Polly's voice.

Instead, he heard…

"Here it is!" Francis said.

Brian realized the dweeb had been talking the entire time they'd been walking, but he hadn't heard a word. He'd been too busy watching Polly eat the cotton candy, delicately pulling pieces off one fuzzy thread at a time, taking them into her mouth.

A mouth he wanted to kiss right now…

"The Freakshow!" Francis continued.

Brian looked up, and saw the crazy carnival lettering on the sign above the red and white striped tent they had gathered in front of. A slim ticket-taker booth – just a portable white mini-tower with a little window in it – was to their left, just before the entryway to the exhibit tent.

"Who's in for some freaks?" Francis demanded. "Just two bucks to see the freakin' fattest man on earth. The Dogboy, or the woman with four legs – twice the woman if you are up to being twice the man. It says so right there."

The dweeb pointed to the 10-foot sign next to the tent that promised all manner of human abominations.

"I want to see the midget," Debbie Moyer said. Her voice was so quiet, Brian almost missed it. But Francis didn't.

"Doesn't your boyfriend fit the bill already? He's so short…" Francis made a big deal out of looking to the right and left. "He's so short, I can't see him!"

"That's cuz he's not here, asshole," Terrence piped up, sticking up for his girlfriend's friend. "Pick on people who can actually answer you, maybe?"

"I'm only joking, you know that, right?" Francis backpedaled.

Brad stepped in. "I'm up for it," he said. "Has anyone seen the movie *Freaks*, because that was kind of revolutionary. My mom has the DVD, and the guy who made it, back in the 1930s, got real freaks to act in it, and the…"

Sandy elbowed him and Brad shut up, a quizzical look in his eye.

Meanwhile, Terrence, Debbie and Agnes elected to step up to the ticket booth, and Mack and Erin followed. The ticket-taker was a clown, just like the one at the front entrance. Brian thought his painted smile looked cruel. Not humorous at all.

"Do you want to go?" Brian asked Polly.

She shrugged. "It might be fun."

Moments later, they had stepped off the edge of the mall parking lot and were all sheltered behind the white canvas tent out of the din of the carnival, standing in an impromptu corridor. Grass beneath their feet, a dingy white canvas roof overhead.

"Bring on the freaks!" Mack said.

Francis pushed to the front of the group, and pointed the way. "I think our destination lies beyond the curtain!" he said, and stepped around the corner.

As soon as he disappeared, they heard Francis scream.

The group bolted forward as one.

***

Brian pulled Polly around the corner, clasping her hand as they ran after Francis. But as quickly as they began to run, they stopped.

Francis was standing in the center of a small room. The tent fabric was stretched out, to make, not a corridor, but a room large enough to hold two large glass display cases. Inside the one in the center of the "room" were five shelves, supporting dozens of jars. Many were the size of mason jars, but the ones on the bottom shelf were substantially larger.

And justifiably so.

The jars on the top shelves showed tiny human embryos in a greenish-yellow brine. The ones on bottom housed the bodies of human children – from infants to toddlers. They were all more, or less, human. All had some strange deformity.

One had eyeballs that seemed as big as balloons, protruding out from its narrow skull and staring out at any who entered the room with huge blue irises. It was obviously dead, but the thing still gave Brian the creeps. Another had a face covered in long brown hair, while its body was bare. It was like a monkey merged with a human baby. And still another had an extra leg extending from its back; a strange, three-legged spider kid. They were all trapped beneath the lids of their glass prisons.

"What's the matter?" Terrence yelled, as they streamed into the wider space.

Francis grinned, and gestured at the shelves of jars. "Oh, the horror!" he said with obvious exaggeration, putting his hands on his cheeks with his mouth wide in a mock grimace of terror.

"Asshole," Brian mumbled under his breath.

Polly looked up at him and frowned.

"Well he *is*, yelling like that," Brian insisted.

"Don't start something," she whispered. Her eyebrows dipped, and Brian bit his tongue. He had no idea what she saw in Francis, but he got it. No criticism allowed. Whatsoever.

"Would you look at that monster?" Francis pointed.

Brian wanted to say something, but instead he looked at the jar that Francis was pointing at.

The yellowish liquid hosted a tiny grey body in its midst. At first, Brian didn't see the point of the display at all, and then he peered closer.

And he realized that the two arms and two legs were also complemented by two heads.

"Do you think they glued them on?" Francis asked. "Or did this kid really have four eyes without having glasses?"

"This *kid* was never born, man. It was never a kid." Terrence said quietly.

"Yeah? I wonder if it was ever alive at all. This is probably just bullshit created for the carnival. Rubber dolls. Look at the ones down there." He pointed to the larger jars below. "Do you really think those were alive? That kid's got three legs. And the one next to it looks like a Cyclops. No way these things were real."

"It's just gross," Agnes said, pulling a long lock of dirty blonde hair to her mouth to chew. "I mean, my mom had a miscarriage after she had my brother. It could have been just like this."

"You think your mom had a two-headed baby?" Terrence asked.

He didn't get an answer, because at the same moment, Erin let out a yell from the other side of the room, at the second stand of display shelves; she stood in front of an array of dozens of bottles.

Francis, Debbie, Agnes and the rest dashed across the grass to the other side of the tent; Brian and Polly followed.

"Are you kidding me?" Mack said before they even got there. "It's a damn cow's head, that's all."

"A cow's head with a kid's *arm* growing out of its ear," Erin corrected. Her voice quivered.

The black and white head of the cow had been preserved, presumably by a taxidermist, and mounted on a steel stand. The small grey arm extended out of the cow's ear to rest its strangely colored, yet clearly human fingers on the beast's skull. It almost looked like the arm was petting the creature.

"C'mon," Mack said, and pulled her away from the display. "I want to get to the real freaks, not this fake museum shit. The clown at the ticket counter said they had real live midgets!"

He pulled his girlfriend away from the mutated cow's head, and through the tentflap to the next room of The Freakshow. The others began to file after them, but Francis hung back. He hovered over the cow's head and whistled.

"That's a headscratcher, yup," he laughed. He reached out to touch the tiny human hand coming out of the cow's ear, but then stoppped short. His smile faltered, but then he let his hand drop and shot a grin at Polly and Brian. "I don't care if it's fake," he said, "it fucking rocks!"

No sooner had he said it, than he was through the tent flap.

Brian enjoyed a private moment of glee. The cow-hand had spooked the bigmouth!

Polly leaned into Brian and kissed him on the cheek. "Thanks for letting them tag along," she said. "I know it's not what you wanted, but it will be fun for awhile. And then we can strike off on our own later. Just the two of us."

He turned to look at her, not sure of how to answer, but it turned out that he didn't have to. Her lips pressed softly to his before he could say a word. Suddenly Brian was short of breath and feeling a warmth that rushed from the base of his spine to all points beyond.

Polly pulled back with a smile, and led him to follow the rest. "That's just a taste for later," she promised with a light laugh.

Brian took a deep breath and followed her, praying for *later* to come fast.

When they stepped into the corridor outside the room of dead freaks in bottles, there was nobody there.

There was, however, a sign posted in the center of the room. In red, ornate letters, it gave them their instruction: *Choose your Freaks.*

There were three different exits from the small canvas antechamber. A banner hung above each. The one in the center read "Freaks of the Flesh." The one to the left read "Freaks of Fantasy." And the one to the right said "Freaks of the Mind."

"Which way?" Brian asked. He was personally curious about the center or left routes. But Polly had other ideas.

"Mack and Francis will probably go see anything that says Flesh or Fantasy. Let's go right, and we can be alone for a few more minutes. I'm sure it's just a big circle and we'll all end up in the same place at the end."

Brian hadn't thought about the most likely place the rest of the group would have gone to, but he had to admit, he did like the way Polly thought.

"Good plan," he agreed. He clasped her hand tightly in his and then pulled her toward the half-covered canvas entrance on the right.

"To the freaks of the mind!" he said, and they stepped through the dirty canvas and into the shadows beyond.

Chapter Two

Jason Darrick

Brian led Polly through the canvas and instantly regretted his decision. An acrid smell assaulted his senses, as though incense had been mixed with ammonia. Polly lurched violently, grasping the canvas for balance. An oily residue slicked the canvas, nearly causing her to fall as she struggled to hold on to it. Brian's throat expelled the contents of his stomach, forcing him to find something to grasp. He took hold of the canvas but wretched further as the oily residue impregnated his palm.

A hiss filled the air, dissipating the smell as it returned to quiet. Tears blurred his vision, his throat hoarse from ejecting his stomach contents. Through his tears he could see the pink stains on the ground, cotton candy wasted.

"Baby, you okay?" Burning seared his vocal chords as he checked on Polly.

"Yeah, I'm fine now." Polly returned to her feet, dizzy but unhurt.

"That was definitely not what I had in mind for a freak of the mind."

"Then you're in luck, my friend." A deep voice echoed above them. "Welcome to the most brain-bending, sensory-depriving freak show you've ever witnessed!"

"The only freak show I've ever witnessed." Brian whispered under his breath. "What's with the smell and why can't we see you?"

"Hold all questions until your mind has been completely melted. The show is about to begin!" The voice faded into a haunting laugh before the lights dimmed to a harsh orange. Polly grabbed Brian and held him tightly. Brian smiled to himself as he kissed Polly's hair, somehow he'd make tonight turn out well.

The tent was lined with a gaudy red velvet curtain, stained so deeply they were visible even under the horrendous light. A slow, high-pitched creaking began to draw the curtain away from one of the pillars holding the tent up. A single red light illuminated a stained screen. Brian and Polly held each other, wary of any other surprises. Brian's eyes adjusted to the flickering light of a 16mm projector. The screen was transformed into a calm ocean, waves gently lapping the black sandy shore. A light citrus smell wafted into the tent. He felt Polly release her grip, she seemed to be interested in where the smell was coming from. His gaze fell upon the vivacious mermaid who had appeared on screen, sunning herself on a rock he hadn't noticed before. Her visage was stunning and bore a close resemblance to Polly, hair falling over her shoulders just the way he'd often seen Polly's do.

Polly followed the scent with her gaze, focusing on the peaked dome that was the ceiling of the tent. Vibrant reds and purples mingled in spirals with soothing greens and browns, sometimes blending to look like her favourite childhood candies, other times forming a picture of an orchard she'd visited many times in her youth. She allowed herself to be captivated, blissfully unaware of herself. She reached upward to pick a plant that had formed in front of her eyes. The stem felt much like that of a rose, while the

bloom was glazed and heavy like an oversized candy. The flower swayed with the rhythm of a wind that wasn't there, enticing Polly. She wanted nothing more than to taste that beautiful candy whose pattern seemed to change with each new emotion. She felt alone, but safe. The fear and nausea had evaporated, even though remnants of her vomit now stained her shirt and legs. The candy swirled in her hands again, bright orange and yellow inserting themselves where she thought they'd fit. It was as though the candy could read her thoughts and adhere to her every whim, though it would not meet her lips. Brian was nearly forgotten, though he was only mere feet away and always in her heart. She couldn't remember a time without him, yet she couldn't imagine sharing this bliss with anyone.

The mermaid swam toward Brian, graceful as a dolphin yet deliberate like a human. Brian reached for her with both arms, nearly begging her to come to him. She wouldn't - couldn't, but his mind couldn't accept it. She perched herself on a rock closer to him, so that her face was clearly visible. It was Polly. He spun around, sure that Polly was in the same room as him, but saw nobody. He turned back to the screen, Polly mouthed the words *I'm here*. He stepped closer to the visage, the waves inviting him to test the water, Polly's eyes begging him to join her. He wiped his face on his sleeve, certain he felt the crisp ocean air blowing in the tent.

Polly beckoned for him, her nails longer than he recalled. Her smile reassured him it was safe. He stepped closer to the screen, almost feeling the sun on his chest. Her smile grew wider, for the first time revealing her teeth. Fangs protruded where canines should have been. Her lips faded from a lush red to a pallid grey while her nose withered into a reddish-brown nub.

Claws replaced her hands, reaching for Brian as he desperately tried to back away. Frozen in place, he could only focus on the slowly distorting face. He was vaguely aware that his arms were flailing and he could hear himself call out for Polly. The face had transformed into the hideous clown who had taken his ticket.

"Welcome to the carnival, Brian." The clown's deep voice chilled him to the bone, made worse by the trails of yellowish spittle dotting his pale chin. "We've all been expecting you. I know I have. Thank you for bringing that succulent little dish along with you. Eviscerating her will be my greatest pleasure. That little bitch has it coming."

"Take me instead! Please, take me instead." Brian began sobbing as the clown looked on in disgust.

"You pathetic, pus-filled, puny excuse for a man," the clown roared and clutched Brian by the throat, "I would have offered you a reprieve if you'd proven to have some resemblance to a man! Now, you'll just die after she does. You'll spend your lives together Brian, I'm just shortening the wait." Brian faded into unconsciousness.

The candy emitted a new scent, though Polly drank it in like an old friend. It was Brian's cologne. Polly gently waved her arms, hoping to touch Brian and remain in her trance. A hint of disappointment crossed her face when her arms touched nothing. The hues of the candy stripes instantly darkened and began to swirl into a new shape. Polly

closed her eyes and imagined Brian's face. As her eyes opened, she focused on the new pattern decorating the candy - it was the face of her boyfriend. Distorted as though he were a reflection in the funhouse mirror, the expression in Brian's eyes was pained. She knew they hadn't left the tent, but the glossy visage was the only sign of his presence right now. The face in candy appeared to be calling out for her, beckoning her closer with each passing second. The image began to fade before her, faintly replaced by a familiar demon. The superimposed faces of Brian and the demon mouthed the words "Welcome home, Polly," before her world melted into black.

***

The acrid smell woke him; Brian hated its familiarity. He was blindfolded but not bound, though his hands did feel heavy at his sides. He heard a muffled voice nearby, and he assumed it was Polly.

"Baby, are you okay?" He yelled. "I had the most fucked up visions, and I hate clowns more than ever now." Brian reached for the knot behind his head; hands retreating back to his sides as they felt the same residue from before. Dizziness set in as he wiped his hands on his pants, the muffled voice alternating between clear and unintelligible.

"Brian... happening... us?" Polly's garbled words sent chills up Brian's spine. "Can't... you... hear..." Brian's heart churned at the sound of her voice, the distance seemingly shifting between words.

"Polly! I can't see you but I can hear you! If you can see me you need to come to me!" Brian's mind refused to focus, as once again the image of the mermaid penetrated his thoughts. The blindfold acted as a screen, magnified tenfold as it forced the image onto the backs of his eyelids. Brian shifted uneasily even though it was Polly's face he saw, not that of the hideous clown. He scanned her, looking for claws or greyish skin, but found none.

"Why do you worry, Brian? I'm your one true love." Brian cringed at the words, he'd said them many times before to get what he wanted. "Revenge is a dish best served dead, don't you think?"

"What do you mean? How can you say that?" Brian's brain swirled through fact and fiction, unsure if this was a hallucination or really playing out before him.

"Polly isn't here right now, she's a little busy preparing for her evening." The voice of the clown rang in his head like a gunshot. "Now, you've been a very bad little boy every time we've come to town, it's time to pay the piper." The clown reached for Brian's throat with the mermaid's hands, and clenched tightly. Brian struggled against its grip, choking and clawing in desperation. As he faded away he looked into Polly's eyes as she mouthed: *Goodbye, I love you*.

Chapter Three

Dan Dillard

The face saying the words wasn't Polly, but something white, with blood-stained rows of fangs and eyes like endless pits leading to hell. "I love you," he heard.

It growled the words, then repeated itself… a little softer and less menacing.

"I love you," it said again.

Not a monster, he thought. *A woman's voice. It's a woman.*

"I love you. Brian! Are you okay? Oh God. Oh God!" Polly was shrieking like a lunatic. She was crying and fanning herself. "Call for help," she said.

Francis was cackling like a jackass. It suited him. Brian's eyes rolled out from behind their lids and finally looked in the direction they were supposed to according to sixth period Biology class. He blinked several times and Polly let out a thankful gasp that sounded like air coming from a tire.

"You didn't puke?" Brian said.

"What?" Polly asked, dumbfounded and relieved.

Brian sat up on his elbows, nine pairs of eyes stared back at him. Polly's eyes filled with tears and it made them bluer than he had ever seen them. The world was fuzzy, washing in and out of focus as he moved from his elbows to sitting. Francis let out another laugh, the loud bellowing sound of someone without an ounce of self-consciousness.

"Fuckin' weak, Bri. You passed out from this?"

Brian looked around. The section of the freakshow tent he was in was striped in red and white, dingy from age. There were trinkets and oddities on shelves and tables. Optical illusions and things that looked like they'd been pulled from the garage of M.C. Escher. Above it all was a large vinyl banner that read *Freaks of the Mind* strung up with rope woven through brass grommets. It reeked of beer, popcorn, candy, the grease of old mechanical things and there was even a hint of the ozone smell that lingers after something electrical sparks in a faulty outlet.

Bumper cars, he thought. *It smells like bumper cars*.

Francis' laughter and Polly's hysterical reaction combined with the smells and the stripes added up to a knot in his belly. A knot crawled up into his esophagus, causing cold sweat to form on his brow and saliva to coat his teeth. Brian vomited a putrid rainbow of cotton candy bits, stomach juice and everything else he'd eaten that afternoon onto Francis' green pants. It effectively silenced the group and relieved his discomfort once and for all.

"Jesus, dude. That's just nasty," Francis said.

"Your pants are nasty. Even without the puke," Mack said, then laughed at himself, nudging Erin in the ribs.

She laughed for his benefit, an unpleasant sound, but her face was squished into an expression of revulsion. Terrence dry heaved and stepped away saying, “I can’t watch people vomit. I’m… sympathetic.”

Agnes went with him. The rest followed, but Francis was last, bitching the whole way out of the tent.

“Are you okay?” Polly said.

Brian felt much better. It helped that he had tattooed Francis’s ugly green pants when he got sick, but whatever had been swimming in his head and made him pass out, made him feel whatever that awful feeling was—it was gone. He stood up and checked his own clothes for the foul liquid, but his pants and shoes, even his Green Day concert t-shirt were clean. Polly was clean. It had all been a dream.

“I’m fine. I just need something to drink so I can rinse my mouth out. Cotton candy tastes like shit the second time around.”

Once they left the tent, they found Francis across the midway between two games, rinsing his pants and shoes with a cutoff piece of hose. The rest stood around talking nervously until Brian and Polly approached the group.

“Hey man, you done erupting?” Mack said.

“Yeah. I feel pretty good actually.”

Polly and Brian walked past the rest and stopped at a food stand advertising elephant ears and funnel cakes and drinks. Brad plunked another five on the counter and asked for a root beer. The disinterested man behind the window of the food trailer took his money and handed him a cup and some change. He pushed a straw through the lid and sucked in a mouthful, swished it through his teeth a few times, then spat the foamy mixture into a trash can that was overflowing with carnival goodness.

“Better?” Polly said. Then she kissed him on the cheek.

Brian thought to himself, *vomiting in front of her might ruin his chances for any tongue wrestling that night, then again it might not*. “Yeah. I’m good. Seriously, stop worrying.”

In a few steps, they were back with the rest. Francis’ pants were two shades of green, light above the knee and dark with water below, but the stains seemed to have rinsed out.

“I’m ready for some rides,” he said. “Think you can handle that Bri-boy?”

His smile was back, a slimy thing full of teeth. Brian thought how Francis’s jaws must ache keeping that cavern yapping all the time. His question had a biting tone to it. Something Brian didn’t appreciate. It wasn’t the usual sarcasm or the usual flashy volume that Brian heard in his voice. There was something else there, a grudge being held, a note of anger that said, *I’ll get you for this, Bri-boy. Just you wait*. He heard that much clear as day.

“I think so. How about the funhouse?”

“Yeah!” Polly shouted.

Brian didn't know where the idea had come from or why he'd suggested it. The words came out like they'd been greased. He didn't hear the others agree. He didn't hear the rest of the midway guests playing games, shouts from small children asking their moms or dads for more money, for more candy, for more prizes. He didn't hear the couple arguing behind him, the woman telling her drunk husband she was tired of his addiction and how he'd embarrassed her for the last time. He didn't hear the rides spinning overhead or the loud music from the Himalaya which was spinning backward at that moment to the thudding sounds of AC/DC's *Thunderstruck*.

He only saw Francis and his accusatory grin. Their eyes were locked as if taut strings attached the two young men at the pupils. He felt something building in his gut, but it wasn't the urge to evacuate his stomach contents this time. He was mad. Brian felt hatred, violence—an unforgiving, inconsolable rage. It wasn't until Francis turned away and started walking toward the funhouse that the sound came back into the world and Brian felt the tug of Polly's hand on his own. He let himself be led by her.

Brad Czernik crept up beside Brian as they walked and nudged him.

"You like funhouses? Did you know I designed a computer program for a haunted house last fall? I took different video images and sounds then mapped them to a 3D model of my buddy's house. We projected it onto the house and it made it look like it had moving eyes and teeth. The doors would open up and blood would drip from the gutters. It was quite amazing if I do say so myself. I plan to add much more detail this year. I could show it to you if you…"

Brian interrupted him with a stare that said he didn't care. He might have cared at another time when he wasn't with his girl. He might have when he was feeling more himself. When he wasn't preoccupied with Francis. Brad stammered and then stopped.

"We can talk about it later, maybe," he said.

"Yeah," Brian replied. "Later."

He let go of Polly's hand and placed his arm around her shoulder. She smiled and put her arm around his waist. Brad rejoined Sandy and the pair clasped hands.

"I loved your haunted house, baby," she said in a baby-talk voice.

"Christ," Mack said. "Somebody get me some testosterone before I need a tampon."

"Women are stronger than men, asshole," Debbie said.

"Bitch," Mack said.

"At least *I* can satisfy your girlfriend," Debbie said.

The crowd laughed in unison, even Erin. Mack's face reddened, but he had no more to say on the subject. Outside the entrance to the funhouse, a voice shouted in their direction.

"Come one, come all! This funhouse here is what you seek! Go inside and take a peek. You might get lost and spend a week!" it shouted.

The voice came from within a ticket booth that stood in front of some rickety metal stairs which led up to a spinning tunnel. The tunnel was painted in a mesmerizing swirl of

purple and orange and was the only entrance. The exit was at the far end, and patrons walked across the three levels, popping out of doors that opened to exterior walkways, then disappearing into other doors that took them back inside. Mack and Erin were first in line. Brian and Polly were last. He fumbled through his wallet for a twenty dollar bill, and pulled it to the ready.

As the crowd drew closer to the window, Francis got out of line and walked to the back. His face was a tangle of emotions, but there was a mischievous smile underneath it all. He stood next to Polly, keeping her between them, leering at Brian the entire time. When they got to the ticket-taker, he stepped up and said, "Three please. My boy is buying."

The man inside, dressed as a clown, smiled, revealing yellowed, gapped teeth with rotten stumps. The bloodshot capillaries in his eyes contrasted heavily against his green pupils. His gloved hand held out three red tickets as Brian forked over his hard earned money.

"Least you could do, Bri-boy, after using my jeans as a toilet."

Brian laughed. The clown chuckled with him, in a strange duet.

"Yeah. Least I could do," Brian said.

The clown handed him his change and the three followed the others into the funhouse. Brian and Polly let Francis go ahead through the revolving tunnel, watching as he stumbled once, placing his hand on the wall as it spun, then reconciling himself before he fell. He stumbled onto the steady platform, then turned right and disappeared from view.

Once he was gone, Brian felt a rush of euphoria, as if a huge weight had lifted from his shoulders. He and Polly went through the tunnel, emerging on the other side victorious, and laughing.

"Next?" he said.

There was a fork in the road, so to speak. One way was full of mirrors, and the other led up a ramp that looked like it went to the second level.

"I don't like mirrors. They make me look fat," she said.

"Bullshit," Brian said. "Not possible."

He pulled her to him and squeezed. She kissed him on the lips as a *thank you*, once again setting him on fire, and then pushed him away.

"Not here, people are coming."

The sound of several voices grew as clomping footsteps came up the metal stairs just outside.

"Let's go up, then," he said and the pair ran up the ramp to the next level.

They stepped on a platform that tilted and shifted under their weight, another followed rolling toward them like a conveyor belt, and ended with one that wobbled. A burst of air shot from a hole in the wall blowing Polly's hair into her face and she gasped, then screamed. Brian grabbed her and she clung to him like a baby chimp to its mother. Then they opened a door and were on a rail thin walkway outside. Calliope music blasted

from ancient public address horns as they scurried across to the other side. Brian glanced down and saw the clown standing behind his ticket booth, smoking a cigarette. It was staring at him.

Polly pulled Brian into the next door into a larger room filled with hanging objects that looked like heavy punching bags a boxer might practice on for body shots. When the door closed, the lights went out and black lights lit the place up in flurry of neon and strobe lights. They battled their way through the hanging, glowing objects like NFL running backs aimed for a touchdown. On the other side, out of breath from laughing and shrieking, Polly stopped and she and Brian took a moment to catch their breath.

"Thanks," she said.

"For?"

"I know you didn't want to come here. And I'm sorry you passed out or whatever that was. I just wanted to say thank you."

She kissed him again, a little longer than before, with a little more promise behind it. *Things were going to happen later*, that kiss said, and he heard it loud and clear. They finished the obstacle course that led to the third level and back outside to what felt more like an observation deck than part of a funhouse. The whole crowd was there as if waiting for them. Francis was being loud, laughing and describing his trip.

"Did you get your ass kicked in the hall of mirrors?" he said. "I couldn't find my way through. I thought I'd never get up here."

His voice grated on Brian's nerves. It made him feel that feeling again. He smelled the cotton candy and the odor of rotten candy apples and stale beer bottles in the trash. His stomach boiled with anger, his shoulders tightened until they felt like they were touching his ears, and he wanted his money back for the damned ticket. He wanted it now. More than anything, Brian noticed, he wanted Francis dead.

"What are you staring at?" Francis said. He was looking at Brian with daggers in his eyes. "You've been tossing me the stink-eye since you got here, Bri-boy. I think you need to relax. Smoke a joint. Rub one out. You seriously need to legit chill."

Brian's mind distorted the world around him, and for one moment, he saw himself reaching his hands out and pushing Francis from the roof. But it wasn't his hand. It was white, pale white, with long, shiny, black fingernails. There was a puffy sleeve covering it, dirty white fabric with black polka-dots and a tattered, frilly cuff. He looked down and saw his shoes were oversized, like those of a clown.

Francis was still talking when the clawed-clown hand reached him. Still bitching like a disgruntled Chihuahua. Then Francis was falling. His body twisted over the railing, flipping end over end before landing on the hollow end of a ten foot pole cemented into a five gallon bucket which was holding up the temporary chain link fence behind the funhouse. The pole went through Francis' body like Brian's straw had gone through the lid to his root beer.

His wound opened like a flower and red fluid spurted from his mouth in a cough as he slid down the pole. The weight of his body pulled the end of the fence over, twisting it

until the boy's feet hit the ground, folding underneath him. He was propped there on his knees, gasping for air and grasping at the metal tube, greased with blood, stuck through his abdomen.

Brian blinked and he was on the roof, still twenty feet from where Francis had been standing. The others were staring over the rail, all in silent shock. Mack made the first move, running down the stairs to the exit and screaming for the clown in the ticket booth.

"Hey! Help! Dude, help! Our friend fell. Help!" he shouted.

"What happened?" Brian said as he looked over the rail, seeing Francis as he had wished him earlier: impaled on a fence post and bleeding to death.

"Francis jumped. He just turned around and jumped over the side," Polly said.

She hugged Brian and pressed her head into his chest. He put his arms around her instinctively and hugged her.

"It'll be okay," he said. It was all he knew to say. "It'll be fine, babe."

The others were talking now, still in shock. Most were crying. Terrence had run down to catch Mack and see if he could help. Agnes was on her cell phone calling 9-1-1. Debbie, Brad and Erin held hands over their mouths like some macabre statue, unable to look away from the sight of Francis.

The whole scene made Brian happy inside. His boiling stomach had subsided. The hate had left him and he was actually at peace. Francis was gone and while that would be a tragedy to some, it was no loss to him. He hadn't done it, but he had seen it through the eyes of the clown. Another dream in the *Freaks of the Mind* display, but this time it had come true… and no one saw what really happened but him.

Chapter Four

Charles Colyott

"Brian? *Brian?"*

Polly looked up at Brian, her eyes red, her brow furrowed. Brian hoped he hadn't been smiling or something; that would be pretty difficult to explain. He stroked Polly's hair and gently kissed her forehead.

"Sorry, I think I must be in shock. I just can't believe it," he said.

"I think we should go for help," Polly said.

"Mack went for help, right?"

"He's not fuckin' down there!" Brad yelled. "I don't see anybody. That goddamned clown is gone, too. They all left him... they just left him there."

Polly pulled at Brian's sleeve. "We should go. We need to get help. We might still be able to help Francis!"

Brian recalled the sight of his nemesis, and was mildly surprised (and more than a little disturbed) that such a violent death - even the death of an annoying prick like Francis - had filled him with a kind of smug satisfaction. He supposed it could be shock... but, deep down, he knew.

Brian had wanted it to happen.

The clown just made it so.

Simple.

Polly pulled at his shirt again. He followed, and together they made their way back through the funhouse. He could hear the others coming down behind them. They tried to move as fast as possible, but the funhouse was designed to confuse, to disorient, to slow patrons down.

"I thought they had to put in emergency exits in these places. What if there was a fire or something?" Polly said, panicking.

"It's okay," Brian heard himself saying, "I know the way."

It was true. He pulled ahead of his girlfriend and began to guide them through, moving with a speed and purpose he couldn't explain. He wove around each corner and moved through each shadowed corridor comfortably, with an easy familiarity.

And when he emerged into the night, alone, the spell was broken. The night air had grown cooler now, and the midway, once bustling with patrons, stood empty. He listened for Polly, called to her, but heard nothing in reply. Taking a few tentative steps, Brian quickly forgot about Polly when he realized she was not the only one who was missing.

There, just a few feet away, stood the temporary fence. There was the pole and the bucket.

But Francis was nowhere to be seen.

Paramedics must have come, must have whisked him away while we were coming down through the funhouse, Brian thought to himself.

He walked closer. The pole had been spray-painted white, and, over who knows how many years, the white had chipped away in places, revealing patches of gray primer. Aside from the minor damage from age and wear, the pole was fairly clean. It was not the gore-slickened implement of death he would have expected. In fact, there didn't seem to be so much as a drop of blood anywhere around.

Brian looked around, certain he must've gotten himself turned around somehow, certain this couldn't be the place where he'd seen Francis Blellingfield breathe his last annoying breath, stuck like a pig on a spit. And yet...

He heard a sobbing from somewhere in the distance. The sound startled him; he hadn't realized how absolute the silence had been until it was broken. It was a woman crying. Was it Polly? Had she finally made her way through the funhouse, only to find herself lost and alone in the seemingly deserted park?

"Polly?" he called out.

Only the sobbing answered him.

Brian followed the sound, past the Tilt-a-Whirl, which spun in lazy, slow circles on its own, past the cotton candy booth, where the mere sight of the sugary treat soured his stomach, to a remote corner of the carnival lot. There, hidden amongst the shadows, was a dilapidated wooden booth. And behind the booth, sitting upon a rusted metal barrel, her long, pale legs drawn up to her chest, was the object of Brian's search.

It wasn't Polly.

The girl looked Brian's age, give or take a year. It was hard to tell for sure in the dark. He knew for sure that she was beautiful, though. So beautiful his heart ached to look at her. Her blond hair and fair skin were luminous in the moonlight, and the way its light played on each soft and graceful curve stole the breath from his lungs.

Brian had never seen anyone like her before, and to see her so sad nearly broke his heart. "Hey," he said, crouching down in front of the booth, "are you okay?"

The girl jumped, startled at Brian's presence. She quickly wiped her eyes and tucked a strand of spun gold behind her ear, exposing the line of her neck. Brian felt his pulse quicken.

"I-I'm sorry," the girl said. "I was j-just being silly."

There was no way Brian was buying that.

"C'mon, tell me what's wrong. Maybe I can help?" He said, smiling to reassure her.

The girl began crying again, harder this time. A light breeze blew, and Brian caught the scent of her on the wind. Honeysuckle, such a fresh, clean smell. He smelled something else, something further away, something like old garbage, but that was surely the carnival trash.

"Hey, what's your name?" he said, trying to change the subject and distract the girl from whatever it was that had upset her.

The girl struggled to compose herself. She wiped her tears again and said, "Hannah."

Brian extended his hand.

"Hannah, I'm Brian. It's nice to meet you."

Hannah smiled shyly and shook his hand. He was amazed at how soft her skin was, how smooth and cool it felt. It briefly occurred to him that he should be looking for Polly, but something primitive in his brain strongly disagreed.

"What's wrong, Hannah?" He said.

"It's the booth... They gave me a bad spot, and with a bad spot I'll never make enough money, and if I don't make enough money..." Hannah faltered and burst into tears again.

Brian frowned. "What'll happen if you don't make enough money?"

"T-They'll put me... back. In the f-freak show!"

Brian laughed in spite of himself, shocking the girl. "Why on earth would they put *you* in the freak show?"

The tears continued to run down Hannah's cheeks, but she stared at Brian, eyes searching his.

"What do you mean?" she said.

Brian cleared his throat nervously. "Just... I mean, it's just that... well, you're *so* beautiful."

Hannah stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Don't make fun of me," she said.

Brian was dumbfounded. "What? I'm not. I swear I'm not!"

Hannah shook her head in denial and extended her long, perfect legs to move away from him. Brian felt his chest tighten.

"Wait! C'mon... Hannah? Just hold on. Don't leave. Please? You said you had to make some money, right? Well, what are you selling? Whatever it is, I'll buy. I'd love to be able to help you out."

The girl stopped and turned to look at him again. Brian felt himself blushing under her gaze. With a slow, shuddering breath, she wiped her eyes again and pointed to the painted sign framing the booth. It was too dark, though, and Brian couldn't quite make out the strange, spidery Victorian letters.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I can't read it."

The girl looked down at her feet and fidgeted nervously.

"It's a kissing booth," she muttered softly.

Brian's heart began to thrum in his chest, hard enough it nearly knocked him over. He glanced over his shoulder for Polly - this would of course be just about the worst time for her to decide to show up - but he was still very much alone.

Except, of course, that he wasn't. Hannah watched him expectantly, cautiously.

"H-How much?" he said.

"Fifty cents for two." She replied.

"For two... kisses?"

"Yes."

Brian reached into his pocket as casually as he could, though his fingers quickly fumbled through the contents. He was shaking too much to be able to feel the difference between a quarter and a nickel, but he found a wadded up dollar bill and slapped it down onto the wood counter with a nervous grin.

"How's that?" he said.

Hannah stared at the dollar bill for several seconds before slowly picking it up.

"Okay." She said.

And before Brian could really appreciate what was happening, he was kissing her.

With his lips pressed to hers, Brian was aware - and ashamed - of every bit of dry skin around his imperfect mouth. He was conscious of the random bits of stubble he'd missed while shaving, and hoped he wasn't poking her somehow. Mostly, though, Brian realized just how inept a kisser he really was. He was just a child - an ignorant, little child.

She, on the other hand, was a goddess.

And he was intoxicated by her.

Until she belched in his mouth.

The rational part of his brain, the part that knew she was a human being, just like him, tried to excuse it. It tried to remind him that he probably still had puke breath and therefore had no right to pass any kind of judgment on anyone for anything.

The other part of his brain, though, the part that wanted to pretend that Hannah truly was a flawless, ethereal goddess and not some poor carnie girl, that part was instantly, irreversibly disgusted. Because not only had she unleashed a heinous, juicy belch right into his open mouth... he was pretty sure he could *taste* it.

Brian pulled away from her, grimacing.

"I'm so sorry," Hannah said, clearly mortified. She held her hand to her mouth. "I'm *so* so sorry."

Brian started to tell her it was okay—

It so *wasn't okay.*

—and to play it off like it didn't really matter—

It did. Lots.

—but that was when the sounds began: a horrible, deep retching sound from somewhere nearby. Brian grimaced again. It sounded like someone was having a rough time getting violently sick, but he couldn't figure out where the sound was coming from.

Then Hannah's arms disappeared.

No, that wasn't exactly right. They didn't disappear at all. Brian's brain was having a hard time coming to terms with what had actually happened. He'd watched it happen, and it hadn't even happened particularly fast, but it was just much easier for him to pretend her arms simply ceased to be. It was far better than admitting the truth: that he'd watched with a kind of awe as her fingers withdrew into her hand, the flesh collapsing, the bones popping as they rearranged; that her skin had turned itself inside out. The retching grew louder, and Hannah's mouth opened obscenely wide, releasing another

loud, wet belch. Something fat and red and slick emerged from her open mouth, something jointed and black-veined. It was soon followed by another identical object and together they began to pry the supple jaws apart with a loud crack. On some level, Brian understood they were Hannah's hands, Hannah's *inside-out* hands, and that he was watching this perfect woman invert herself, but the Brian that wanted to remain sane quickly suppressed the thought. He began backing away, slowly, still unable to look away from the spectacle before him.

Hannah was unrecognizable now. Her now external organs hung like tumors from the misshapen and glistening red sack which lurched in the space where her shapely form had been just moments before. Tentacular optic nerves waved idiotically from the abortion of her new face, and a mouth like a stab wound gaped and closed repeatedly.

Involuntary sounds escaped from Brian's mouth. Sounds of panic and disgust, sounds of fear and madness. He backpedaled faster, but the thing lunged for him.

"*Fiftycentsfortwo,"* it said slowly, in a voice like bones stuck in a garbage disposal.

Brian fell backward, landing on the pavement hard. The moon had emerged from the clouds, and he could finally read the sign above the booth.

Two things became very clear to Brian in that moment. He knew from the sign - *Hannah & Anna Prenderghast's Exotic Siamese Kissing Booth* - that the creature before him was, somehow, Hannah's twin…

Her impossibly conjoined twin.

And he knew Anna Prenderghast was a jealous sister.

She wanted her kiss.

Chapter Five

Dale Eldon

"*Fiftycentsfortwo*," Anna said with a sound that echoed a regurgitated giggle. "*C'mereloverboy!"*

The organs of the twins swung side-to-side, slobber draining from the orifice that passed for a mouth. Brian turned to run to the funhouse, only he couldn't remember the direction. Fuck it, he didn't care where the direction took him as long as it was away from the Wonder Twins.

Anna kept so close behind Brian he could smell an obnoxious but captivating odor, forcing his libido into overdrive.

"*It'smine! Nomnomnom…"* A squishy smacking sound followed the words, giving them emphasis.

Brian skidded around a corner and bolted for an exhibit called CAVERN OF THE DEAD. Fake zombies stood in dark corners, rubber hands reached up from foot-deep water that covered the floor. Upon entering, Brian couldn't determine the size of the structure, and after taking a few turns, he stopped to rest his hands on his knees. Deep water-punches from the direction he'd come made it clear Anna was a kiss away.

"Hey Bri-boy," a familiar voice said from a dark corner. "They still don't know you murdered me do they? It's cool - the she-bitch-twins will take care of my light work."

Francis, the fuckstain is back! Brian thought while he ran.

Footfalls smacked the water-carpeted floor harder. Anna charged toward the sound of Francis' voice; she wanted her kiss.

Brian ran past Francis, rounding a corner that put him back on the roof; still no sight of the others.

"What the hell?"

"Oh, Bri-boy. Silly, silly Bri-boy," Francis said from behind. "You can't escape: you're part of the carnival now." Brian turned, and Francis stood between him and the door. "Tossing your cookies all over my favorite pair of pants was the first sign."

"First sign of what, Frannie?" Brian said, trying to think of a way to get past Francis.

"And killing me was your final initiation. Congrat-u-fuck-ulations Bri - I got stuck with the zombie-spirit-whatever, and you get to audition for captain of the freak squad. That is, if they don't kill you first."

"Suck it, Frannie! I'm going to wake up and your ugly ass will be alive. I'll feel ridiculous for whatever caused me to black out, and life will go on."

"This is bigger than you think. There's no escaping."

Francis took a step toward Brian as Anna appeared behind him; a nice wet belch distracting him.

"*Youcanhaveakissforfreedeadboy*."

Anna somehow grabbed a hold of Francis, and swallowed his incorporal form in one gulp. The action looked like smoke being inhaled.

Brian didn't stay to watch in awe this time. He found the steel ladder that led down to where Francis had been impaled and shrugged off the oddity of not having seen the ladder before. Half way down, his stomach tightened as a glob of something thumped him on the head. It oozed down across his cheek, down his neck and under his shirt. Looking up, he saw Anna where she stood, staring. Slobber trailed from her lips, dripping toward him.

"*Fiftycentsfortwo!*" Anna said, her voice strained.

Brian's desire swelled again; he wanted her, both of them, but didn't fully understand why. *This is what I get for trying to steal a kiss? I'm sorry God.*

His fingernails elongated, turning black. The corners of his mouth stretched uncomfortably. Big floppy shoes appeared where his feet used to be. The toes of the shoes pressed against the wall through the slats, shoving him off the ladder.

Brian landed next to where Francis had been impaled as Anna leapt from the roof, landing in a squat position next to him. Even with the intoxication of the obnoxious odor Brian passed out.

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Spinning gold lights circled above Brian's head, shining through his eyelids. He awoke to a bright blur and a familiar odor filling the room. Hannah looked at him with an angelic smile.

"I'm sorry about Anna. She always steals the guys I want for myself." The angelic smile turned into a coy grin. "We talked, and she agreed to let me keep you. She's happy with that Francis guy. I don't know why; he never shuts up, and he's dead. But, I don't care, I get *you.*"

There was no hiding the evidence of his lust now, but Hannah didn't seem bothered. "Hmm, there will be time for that later. But for now you have survived the freak-fest. You still have friends that need tending to."

"W-what do you mean?" Brain asked, rubbing the back of his head.

"Silly boy. No one becomes part of the show without earning it. You have to kill them." Hannah said, nonchalantly.

"Whoa, hey, I like you, and it's not that I, ah, don't want to be part of the show," Brian grasped for the words she wanted to hear. "B-but, ah, I can't kill my friends, especially Polly."

Hannah's face scrunched. "If Polly was so important, you wouldn't have kissed me! And besides, you killed Francis; but I don't blame you by the way."

"I love Polly, I just… I just haven't been myself since we got here."

"And, just what are you?" Hannah pointed down at his feet.

The floppy shoes stood high. Brian held up his hands, the nightmarish fingernails glistening in the gold light.

"Oh, fuck me."

“Later, my dear. You have to earn that too.” The coy grin stretched across her face.

“That’s not what I meant. I can’t help what my body is doing. I don’t want you, or this stupid freak-show.” Brian swung his feet off the bed, and tried to run with the floppy shoes. Hannah giggled as she watched him try to escape.

“You could move faster, but you would have to be willing to do as you’re told.” Hannah said, still enjoying the show.

“Fuck off.” Brian said, flipping his middle elongated fingernail.

“Silly boy, not yet. First, you need to hide your new form. Then you can go back to the others and have your way with them.” Hannah said with a wink.

“I’m not going to-”

“No?” Hannah sauntered over to a table covered with a beige sheet. A round bulge beneath it caught Brian’s attention. With a flourish, she yanked the sheet away revealing a crystal sphere.

Frozen in place, and still in the funhouse were his friends; captured inside of the crystal. The only one who mattered was Polly; the one person he would never hurt, and yet the tang of blood swept over his tongue. The urge to rip out her heart overpowered him.

“*Kill me.*” Brian whispered.

“What? I’m sorry?”

“You’re going to have to kill me, I’m not touching Polly.” His voice rose with conviction.

“Hmm, that’s cute. You’re talking like you have a choice.” Hannah moved in to kiss Brian and her perfection petrified him. This time the kiss was utter bliss, no wet belch at all. Her tongue grew inside of his mouth, snaking down his throat. Any other woman and this would have been disgusting, it would have cut off his air supply, but instead it electrified him.

His body slid into hers, becoming one. Not a sexual mating, but as their bodies merged, Brian faded back to reality as the texture of the lips changed. They were familiar and belonged to Polly. Brian pulled back and she stared at him flabbergasted.

“Where the hell have you been?” Polly asked. Brian could feel her heart pounding from the passionate kiss.

“Hey, uh, I got lost.”

“I thought you knew the way? We need to get help for Francis.”

“Right.” Brian looked down at his hands and saw they were back to normal. “Well, I found the way out.”

“Are you sure this time?”

He paused, distracted by her heartbeat; it sounded so tasty. “Y-yeah.”

Brian led the way again, peeking from the corner of his eye to insure the group was still following. They came out of the funhouse where Brian had exited earlier. No Hannah. The place was packed and the rides were still going. Polly ran to where Francis had landed.

“Oh my God! Where is he? There isn’t even blood!” Polly said, covering her mouth with both hands.

“Maybe help already got to him. We were trapped in that stupid funhouse for a while.” Brad said.

“We need to find out if he’s been taken to the hospital.” Polly said.

Brian wove through the patrons, catching sight of Mack. Brad noticed him too, running over to the bumper cars where an unmoving Mack sat in a non-active car. Polly followed as Brian just stared. He knew what had happened, but this time it wasn’t his fault.

“Oh no, no… *Brian*, Mack is dead too.” Polly said with her voice straining.

“She’s right, man. Mack is gone! Dude, his throat is slit. Who the hell does that at a carnival?”

Now it was the tang of Brad’s blood that was intoxicating to Brian. Polly was going to have to wait her turn. Someone had already got to Mack, competition it would seem. But Francis was his trophy, and now Brad would be his next. Brian didn’t have a reason to target Brad; he just seemed too tasty to pass up. Like a deep-fried Twinkie - who could resist?

Chapter Six

James Garcia Jr.

"Well now. You're doing quite well for yourself, aren't ya?" a gruff-sounding voice teased, hocked up a wad of phlegm and then spat it hard onto the midway. Brian didn't see it, but he heard. He heard every moment of it.

Brian turned slowly. Carnival patrons pushed and shoved as they attempted to either get closer to the terrible crime scene or flee from it. The other panicked voices that surrounded him were strangely muted. Peripherally, he noticed Erin had just rushed over to see what remained of her boyfriend, his throat slashed to ribbons. She screamed. Brian had the passing thought that she wouldn't be laughing like that yelping dog for at least the end of the evening, and perhaps for the next several weeks - which would be a good thing as far as he was concerned. He paid her little attention. Right now he had other pressing concerns.

"That's good," the voice continued to nip at his ears. "Real good."

"Who the hell are you?" Brian asked no one, demanding to know. He continued to move toward the voice as if floating. He didn't know why. It seemed really important. He had a fleeting thought about Polly and, of course Brad, who he apparently was supposed to kill.

Suddenly the crowd parted and he saw him. It was the clown he had seen from high above the Funhouse. He leaned against a portable light post, grinning as he took a deep drag from his cigarette. Brian walked up to him and stood there, challenging him. He hated clowns and this one did nothing to dispel those dark feelings; the garish makeup, the dingy costume that looked as if it were never washed. He felt himself growing angry with every lingering moment. He could taste blood in his throat once again.

"I asked you a question, damnit!" Brian gritted his teeth and said.

"So you did, so you did."

"Are you going to answer me or do I need to wipe that fucking grin off your face?"

The clown studied Brian a moment, took one last drag from his smoke and then flicked it across the midway without looking away. "Relax, Bri-boy. I'm not here to get in your way. Far from it. I'm here to assist."

"What the hell are you even talking about? I don't need shit from you!"

"Oh, I know," the clown nodded his head. "You're doing just fine, Bri-boy."

"I hate that fucking name. Do you hear me?" he took a threatening step forward and tightened his fists.

"I hear ya. Relax. What are you gonna' do? Push me over the side like Francis or slice my throat like poor Mack?"

"I haven't done anything to Mack!" Brian shouted. "I had nothing to do with that!"

"Didn't ya'?" the clown asked, flashing his yellowed and disjointed teeth. "I mean, who could blame you? I saw the way he was making nice with your girl."

“What?” Brian asked, incredulous.

“Oh, c’mon, man!” The clown suddenly stepped forward, nearly knocking him over. “I saw it! And I know you saw it, too. Polly could barely contain herself when he looked at her. When she spoke to him, her voice reached octaves she never found with you.”

“Shut up!” Brian said, but it came out as a whisper.

The clown leaned closer still and their noses touched. The bulbous fake appendage was warm and sticky with perspiration. Brian recoiled at its touch. “I mean, she totally forgot about you when he was with her.”

His toxic words grated on Brian. He could feel his blood pressure rising as the clown’s voice grew darker and harder. They were like little daggers that dug into him and then were twisted to be sure they were felt. “Shut up!” He mouthed, but the words wouldn’t come. Brian pictured it all. Mack was slumped in a bloody heap behind him, but in his mind’s eye he was very much alive and standing beside his girl, tenderly stroking Polly’s bare arms while she got lost in his brooding eyes; roaming over that tight pink shirt with his hungry eyes.

“Yeah, see?” the clown spoke through gritted teeth as he twisted those daggers. “No wonder you ripped his fucking throat out!”

“I did that?” Brian whispered. An image flashed in his mind, different from the one before. Polly was bending over to tie her shoes and Mack was there, standing behind her from across the midway, staring fondly at her ass. Brian stood behind Mack. He reached out to forcibly interrupt Mack’s thoughts; however, when he put forth his hands to spin him around, he realized his arms were covered in dingy white sleeves. He followed those arms to angry long fingers, dressed in long, jagged black fingernails.

“Man, I could ride that all night!” Mack said under his breath.

The trouble was it wasn’t entirely under his breath and Brian heard every word of it. His anger went from displeasure to pissed-off instantly. He grabbed Mack by the arm and spun him away from Polly. He punched him viciously in the belly and yanked him away, spinning him around the corner into a bumper car that wasn’t being used. Mack demanded to be released, spewing a string of profanities, but Brian heard none of it. The world spun as he threw Mack inside the car. He saw his feet as everything rushed past his consciousness. They were long, floppy and white, but he didn’t stop to consider this fact. All he knew was Mack had been screwing Polly with his mind and he couldn’t stand for that. It should have been him screwing her. In fact, if it weren’t for these meddling friends of his, he and Polly might have found a quiet location somewhere behind a tent to do exactly that. But no! She didn’t want him. She wanted Mack. He knew this with every passing moment. He would never have Polly for himself.

Mack yelled something that sounded like an apology, but Brian was having nothing of it. He made a move to slap his treacherous face with everything he had.

The funny thing was that wasn’t what he did. Instead, he swept for the throat and split it in half.

The clown before him laughed, maniacally, dragging Brian from the vision. He had another smoke lit. The fire at the end of it was unnaturally red. Brian had no words. Could it be true? Had he murdered not one, but two of his schoolmates? The answer seemed to be very clear to him as he stared deeply into the gapped, yellowed teeth and equally yellow eyes that hovered before him.

Someone else was speaking to him now, but he couldn't hear the words. He only had the knowledge of it.

"You're one of us now, Bri-boy." The clown exhaled and then said.

"No, I'm not! I hate fucking clowns and I hate fucking carnivals. I always have."

"Don't knock it 'til you've tried it awhile. I never cared for 'em much either, but you're a natural." The clown took another drag.

Brian felt something tugging on his Green Day shirt.

"Go to Hell!" Brian snapped.

The clown laughed and choked on his cigarette smoke. "Hell?" he said with a terrible grin. "There's no Hell. There's only carnival! Kill some more of your friends and it'll be forever!"

Brian snapped and grabbed the clown by the neck. The clown made no move to free himself, nor fight back in the slightest. His neck was strangely cold and rough to the touch.

"I didn't kill my friends!"

"No?" the clown said. "Explain your transformation to your friends then."

He felt one last tug and heard his favorite shirt rip.

"Brian?"

Brian spun away from the clown at last. "Goddamnit! What?"

It was Polly. Her eyes ballooned. There were five familiar faces standing behind her, wearing equal looks of horror. Polly released his shirt and stepped away from him.

"*What are you doing?*" she asked.

"Oh, my God!" Brian heard one of them proclaim. He saw Sandy cover her mouth in shock and assumed it was her.

"He's fucking snapped!" Terrence said and shook his head.

"No, I haven't!" Brian said. "It's the goddamn clowns! It's all of them! Tell them, you piece of shit!"

Brian turned back to the clown he had by the neck, but he was gone. There was only an aluminum light pole there. He had been choking it with his hands. He released it and slapped it once with both hands as he struggled to come to grips with his predicament. He stared at his hands and the ten sets of glossy black fingernails that painted his fingertips. He heard the clown's terrible voice in his head as he quickly thrust his hands into his pockets as far as they could go.

"*Explain your transformation to your friends then.*"

"I'm sorry," Brian said to no one and everyone at the same time. His thoughts were going a mile a minute as he attempted to understand what was happening. He stared back

at the faces he found studying him. Polly was there. Erin was there, quietly sobbing and being comforted by both Sandy and Agnes. Terrence stood behind Polly, while Brad stood on the other side of everyone. He looked back to Polly. “I’m sorry, babe,” he said. “I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

Polly took another step away from him as she studied the boyfriend she seemed to no longer recognize. “*What’s happening to you?*” she mimicked, her lovely face tightening. Before he could answer, however, she continued. “Nothing! Francis is dead and we don’t know what happened to him. Now Mack is dead!” Erin began to cry once again. “Nothing happened to you. I can’t believe you! Why you selfish son of a…!”

“Oh, my God!” Agnes cried out, spinning about them as if looking for something, or someone.

“What is it?” asked Brad, following her eyes.

She covered her mouth and began to cry. “I can’t find Debbie!”

Chapter Seven

Matt Schiariti

Bedlam. Chaos. The area surrounding the bumper cars had denigrated into a scene of pure disarray. Some of the more morbidly curious moved in closer to see Mack's fresh corpse. Mothers and fathers covered their children's eyes and whisked them away from the gory display. Teens and tweens pointed and spoke in hushed whispers. The crowd was an undulating mass of humanity, and at the center of it all was Brian, with his hands thrust in his pockets, his glossy black talons digging through the fabric and into his skin. Off-key calliope music mixed with exhilarated screams, laughter, and *Paradise City* coming from the Himalaya off in the distance, adding to the madness of it all.

Brian had lost his shit. There was no doubt in his mind now. Sinister clowns, psychedelic mermaids, murderous visions of dead classmates come true, inside-out conjoined twins with crystal balls who ate the spirits of the fallen and demanded the death of his friends.

What the fuck was going on?

"What do you mean you can't find Debbie?"

Terrence. It sounded like Terrence's voice.

A sniff. A sob. Then Agnes's voice.

"I meant just what I said! I have no idea where she is."

Polly spoke in a calm voice. "Agnes, when was the last time you saw her?"

"I… I don't remember. In the funhouse I think? I just don't know." Her words ended in a gurgling sob. Terrence enveloped her in his arms. "Why is this happening? Debbie, then before that, Frances and Mack." Her crying picked up, and at the mention of Mack's name, Erin became hysterical. A wail escaped her throat.

"Mack!" The yapping cheerleader rushed off into the gawking crowd. Polly took off after her.

"Erin. Erin, come back!"

"Where are the cops?" Brad said. "Didn't you call 9-1-1? Where the hell are the cops!" He paced back and forth with quick steps, and his arms flailed with nervous energy. Sally's head looked to be on a swivel as she watched the repetitive movement.

"*Cops? Hmmm, that just won't do, Bri-boy."* The deep voice shot through Brian's brain like an ice pick. His eyes drifted from his friends as he turned in a circle, looking for the clown, but all he saw was the writhing sea of people who'd gathered around the bumper cars. *"That super geek has* got *to go, my friend."*

The clown was right. Brian didn't know why or how, but he knew the clown was right. The thought of Brad started his stomach boiling again, brought the taste of blood up from his throat.

Brian's nails punctured his skin deeper and he felt warm blood break free. It trickled down his leg, and he felt his jeans grow wet.

"Easy there, Bri-boy. Don't wanna give yourself away now, do ya?" The clown chuckled directly into Brian's cortex. It echoed, as if it bounced off of the inside of his skull.

Brian shook his head.

"Kill the nerd, save the carnival. Hehehe."

"Kill the nerd, save the carnival…"

"Atta boy. Kill that fucker. I betcha didn't know this, but he's got a little secret. Mister computer hacker over there has a tendency to Photoshop sweet little Polly's face onto naked chicks. Stills, animated ones, you name it. Fap-city! Sally just doesn't wanna put out. Besides, she's nowhere near the tasty morsel your pretty Polly is, am I right or am I right?"

Brian's blood boiled. Once again, the clown's words struck home with an undeniable ring of truth.

"Yeah. Yes. You're right."

"*I can't hear youuuuuu!"*

"Yes, goddamnit, you're right!"

Brian's yell rose over the cacophony of the carnival. Terrence and a sobbing Agnes looked at him. Sandy gasped and put a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. Brad stopped his pacing and regarded Brian with a wary look. Polly, who'd been struggling to keep the blubbering Erin from hopping the security fence to get to her dead and bloodied boyfriend, whipped her head around. Blue eyes locked onto Brian's. He turned his head away from her and addressed Brad.

"I'm going to go look for Debbie. Come with me?"

Brad's brow furrowed. "Shouldn't we wait for the cops?"

"Who knows when they'll get here? The rest of the group can stay put and wait for them while we go look."

"That's what I call smart thinking, Bri-boy. Assess, adapt, overcome, and all that happy horse shit. You'll be a great addition to our little carnival. I knew it. I'm very good with these sorts of things."

The clown's incessant yammering made Brian grind his teeth. "Fuck you," he said under his breath.

"Did you just tell me to fuck off?"

Brad was right there. Brian hadn't noticed him approach.

Fucking asshole. "No. Was just talking to myself. Come on. Let's go look for Debbie."

Brian set off, Brad in tow, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

Polly.

"Where are you going, Brian?" Her voice was clipped, her blue eyes a conflicting array of concern and disappointment.

Brian pulled away from her. "What do you care?"

Shocked, Polly took a step back, as if he'd smacked her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Brad cleared his throat. "Um, I should go tell Sandy what we're up to. I'll let you two, you know, talk things out." He loped over to his girlfriend, clearly not wanting to be part of the brewing thundercloud of tension that radiated off the couple in physical waves.

"You know what I mean, Polly. I thought you loved me."

"What? I do, but—"

Brian's face was now inches from hers. His sharp claws dug further into his flesh, still hidden deep within his pockets. Blood soaked the inner fabric and had begun to stain his jeans, but he ignored it.

"I saw you flirting it up with Mack." He smirked when he saw the shock on her face. "Yeah, I'm not stupid. This was all some kind of big joke, this whole trip to the carnival, and I'm the goddamn punch line. Bad enough you defended that shit-stain Frances, but eye raping Mack behind my back? That's low."

"That's the spirit, Bri-boy! Give her what-for!" The deep voice inside Brian's head spread through his body. He felt bold, ballsy, murderous. *"Don't take much longer though. Cops, remember? You've got some meat to butcher before they get here. Tick tock, tick tock."*

Polly's palm connected with Brian's cheek. A deep, warm sting spread over his face. People closest to them heard the slap over the droning white noise of the carnival but the couple ignored both their stares and that of their group.

"I can't believe you just said that to me." Polly's chest heaved. "You selfish, crazy, prick!"

Pain and shock warred for dominance in her blue eyes. Brian felt like he was falling. What the hell was wrong with him? How could someone so beautiful, so sweet, do anything to hurt him like that? He loved her, didn't he? His resolve began to crumble.

"Tick tock, B-boy. You saw how she was with Mack. Would I lie? She's not what she claims to be. I know it, you know it. Now, get a move on."

Brian grit his teeth as the now familiar flavor of blood worked its way to the back of his tongue. The pain in his legs had turned into a dull pulse that beat in tandem with the throbbing of his assaulted cheek. It focused him, renewed his resolve.

"Brad and I are going to find Debbie. I gotta go."

She reached for him, but he dodged out of the way and stepped up to Brad.

"Let's go."

Brad muttered something to Sandy, gave her a hug, then a lingering kiss. "Where we going?"

Back where it all started, you pervy shit.

"The Freakshow."

***

Brian and Brad wove their way through the throngs of people milling about the midway. Past the tilt-a-whirl and its screaming riders, who were blissfully unaware of the carnage less than fifty yards away. The grass crunched underfoot as they forced a path through the herd of human cattle. Brian could feel their stink, smell their sweat. The calliope music blared on in an off-key, non-stop drone, but he no longer hated it. It sounded like home now. He closed his eyes, knowing the way to The Freakshow by heart for reasons unknown to him, and let the music coat him like a warm, soothing blanket.

Brad yammered at a rapid fire pace. That was one sound Brian could do without.

"Hey, Brian? Brian! You listening to me man? Why are we going to The Freakshow?"

"Debbie wanted to see the midgets, right?"

"Yeah, I think I remember her saying something like that."

"Then it's as good a place to start as any, don't you think?"

"Sure. Yeah. Good logic. Dude, something wrong with your hands?" Brian stopped. He stared at the geek he so wanted to kill. Brad pointed at Brian's pockets. "You're bleeding, man. Pretty bad, from the looks of it."

"Must've fallen on something when I passed out earlier. Don't worry about it. Come on. The tent's right up there."

They stood at the threshold leading into the tattered red and white striped tent.

Just before entering, Brian felt an electric current run up his back. Instinctively, he turned around. Off in the distance, under an eerie halo of light stood the clown and Hannah. The clown lit a cigarette, the tip glowing bright as lava, and gave Brian a crooked grin filled with rotting teeth and diseased gums, along with a thumbs up. Hannah put a hand to her mouth and blew him a kiss. Her lips moved, and her sensual voice broadcast directly into his head.

Do like we discussed, and this is all yours, lover boy.

Brian shuddered.

"Brian? Let's go in, man. Bri, you hear me?"

Brian clenched his jaw and dug his claws into his legs. "Yeah, I hear you. Follow me."

The tent seemed darker than the last time he'd been inside and Brian wondered if it wasn't a trick of the mind. All the same smells from before caressed his nostrils. Like the sound of the carnival, the odors had grown familiar and almost comforting.

Brad showed his red ticket stub to the cruel-mouthed clown and walked in. Brian approached the ticket-taker and presented his half-torn ticket.

"You've gotten this far, Bri-boy. Now it's up to you to do your own dirty work." The clown raised his arms and indicated the dark expanse of the tent. "You can't be working through me all the time if you expect to inherit all you see before you, now can ya?" He winked a bloodshot eye and lit a cigarette. Red smoke curled up into the pitch black at the apex of the tent. "By the way. Nice and dark in there. No need to hide your transformation."

Brian followed the clown's rheumy eyes down to his crimson-stained pockets. He pulled out his hands and his black, high gloss claws. Red light from the cigarette tip danced along them, looking as if it swam beneath the surface.

"Keep looking, Bri-boy. Down, down, down!"

Brian did. His feet were huge, clad in oversized clown shoes.

"Chip off the old block," the clown cackled. He hocked up a wad of phlegm and spit it into the darkness, then nodded his head behind him. "Get in there soldier. Let's see how deep your commitment runs."

Not used to the shoes, his first steps were tentative as he made his way into The Freakshow and the three options that lay beyond.

Brad poked his head through the open curtain. "You coming or what, Brian? Jesus, it's dark as hell in here."

"There is no hell. There is only carnival."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Let's go in."

Brian brushed past a confused Brad and into the main corridor. He ignored the dead freaks in the bottles, walking straight to the center of the room.

Choose your Freaks.

Unafraid in the darkness, Brian pointed a clawed hand to the banner above the middle exit. "Freaks of the Flesh."

"Yeah, she's gotta be in there. Where else would they keep the midgets?" Brad cupped his hands around mouth and shouted. "Debbie? Debbie, you in here?"

Brian was ready to dig his claws into the computer geek's back when Brad darted off into the exhibit.

"Fucking asshole." He followed his classmate and was greeted by a veil of complete black.

"Brad? Brad, you in here?"

No answer. Utter silence. Not even the continual racket from the carnival penetrated the tent. The space reeked of hay, incense, piss, and shit. Brian took in a huge breath and smiled.

A deep, familiar voice boomed from nowhere and everywhere.

"Welcome to the most hideous display of human suffering this side of hell! Abysmal abominations! Devastating deformities! Feast your eyes while your stomach churns in horror. The show is about to begin!"

A loud bang, like some ancient switch being thrown, reverberated off the weathered tent.

Above, a light dangled from the ceiling, swaying with no breeze. Its putrid yellow light cut through the sheet of blackness, like a tear in space, and cast the tent in a supernatural radiance. Brian blinked against the harsh light as his eyed adjusted.

Brad was nowhere to be seen. There was only Brian.

And a six foot high cage in the center of the room, not more than ten feet away.

Brian had expected to see a full array of wretched freaks. The billboard next to the tent advertised the full gamut of oddities: the fattest man on earth, the Dogboy, the woman with four legs, the midget. There was no sign of any of them. Only the singular cage.

He walked under the cone of light, closer to the display and its thick, iron bars. The smell of human excrement grew stronger with each step.

Blinking his eyes several more times, Brian finally noticed the cage's occupant.

Inside was what looked to be a naked woman, squatting on a bed of old hay. Her back was to him but he could see the feminine curves easily enough. The woman's skin looked like parchment in the odd lighting, thin and cracked. Her spine jutted out, as did her rib cage. Malnourished.

He took several hesitant, clopping steps with his clown feet, Brad forgotten for the moment. The woman's shoulders had been shaking silently and stopped when he'd gotten to within arm's length.

In slow motion, the figure turned around, her joints making sickening popping sounds.

She didn't blink in the light. Didn't need to. Couldn't.

The girl's eyes had been sewn shut, thick strands of yarn woven in crude X patterns joining the lids together. Caked blood coated the barbaric incisions. Her nose was gone, a gaping hole left in its place. Her lips were a chapped flaky mess. Some sort of bug seemed to be burrowing into her upper lip. Flies swarmed her tattered, greasy hair.

She grabbed an iron bar with a decrepit, bony hand, and the skin split at the knuckles. Pus oozed from the wound.

Brian took a step back.

The girl's mouth opened. Maggots poured from her ruined lips in steady streams, landing on the hay at her feet with dull splats.

He didn't recognize the girl… until she spoke. The voice was low and sounded like her throat was lined with sandpaper, but Brian knew it instantly.

"You're all going to die here," she rasped.

With narrowed eyes, Brian closed the distance.

"Debbie?"

Chapter Eight

Anne Michaud

It started real low, a raspy wail that could be mistaken for laughter, rippling around him and tickling up his spine. This thing wasn't Debbie, it couldn't be: this girl he used to know, used to call a friend, had been ripped to shreds and sewn back together in a grotesque doll. The dark part of him wanted to laugh, but the other wept, deep inside his chest; none won, for now.

"I'll get you out, Deb," he said just in case someone watched him from the shadows. Brian approached the cage, but the smell of excrement got too intense and he blocked his nostrils with his fingers to stop gagging. The tip of his claw touched his nose, finding it rounder and larger than usual. Blown up, like the fucking clown stalking him. "Who did this?" he asked, his voice resounding around him.

He could have sworn Debbie looked right at him through her stitched eyelids. "You know who did, you know so well…" Then, with finality in her tone, "It was you."

The air in the tent tightened around his throat, an invisible gloved hand making it hard to breathe. "It's not possible, Deb. I've been looking for you. Ask anyone, they all saw me. I've been with them this whole time and…" But had he? Wasn't there a part of him that wanted to see her in pain?

Yes, the voice said. *Yes, you did the deed and you loved every part of it. And I know, because I saw everything.*

"Fucking coward," spat Debbie, maggots dropping to her knees. They dug themselves into her skin and disappeared. The fresh wounds oozed clear liquid, soaking instantly through the hay, each droplet echoing as it hit the cage floor, "Finish what you started. I can't go on like this. It hurts so bad."

In a desperate attempt, her hands clutched at the bars separating them before she swatted at him, trying to grab his face, his hair, his clothes. No more nails at her fingertips, only bones peeking through rotting skin.

"You did this!" she cried, her voice distorted with rage. "You did this to me."

"Don't touch me," he blurted, backing into the dark. "I won't kill you, Deb." Someone laughed, but Brian ignored it: it came from inside his head. "I'll get the others and we'll forget about tonight, ok? There's medics somewhere," he said, sounding neither convinced nor convincing.

Debbie tucked her chin to her chest, rocking herself as the cage followed her movements. As he watched her, Brian heard soft footsteps scattered to his left and right. No voices called to him or the girl dying in the cage; no one was there but a cold breeze breathing down his neck.

Like a puppet obeying an invisible string tugging her head back up, Debbie faced Brian with a bone-cracking snap. "You killed me!" she shouted, loud enough for people outside the tent to hear. "You killed me with your twisted mind, you sick fuck!"

Brian wanted to shake her until she stopped breathing; wanting to silence her and the laughter welling up inside him forever.

He didn't move toward her, instead kept his claws hidden in his pockets. Debbie's raspy breath hiccupped into sobs, pleading, "Make the nightmare end, Brian. Make this end, please!" She sounded more like a broken little girl than the one he used to know. Thick blood poured out of her eyes like tears tracing down her face.

End her, she's a pain in the ass and it will feel so good, said the clown inside his head.

"But how?" Brian asked, heart pounding in his ears. His mind assaulted him with images, a million different ways to make her suffer: chainsaws danced before his eyes, ropes dangled in his vision and knifes twirled around his claws. "What do you want? Something fast or something painless?" As if he really cared.

"I don't care… I don't." Debbie inched closer to the gap between them, as Brian approached her cage soiled with her blood and shit. "Now, Bri-boy. Do it now."

He ignored how fake she sounded, how unreal this Debbie looked. "Just so you know, I'm doing this for you," he lied, as the monster within grew an inch taller.

The pangs of guilt and fear evaporated as Brian's claws passed through the bars and closed around Debbie's throat, so small in his grip. She touched the leather of what his skin had become and pressed harder, helping him kill her.

Atta boy. End her sad, pathetic life, the clown said in his mind. *She's never been loved, always was rejected. She won't be missing much.*

Debbie's body jerked as she gasped for air, her hands holding onto Brian's until they melted into one. At the last moment, she tried to push his hands away, but he didn't loosen his grasp. The cage swung and hit Brian in the legs, but he never moved away, not until she stopped breathing - dead at last.

He'd seen her soul withering out of her, a black cloud blown away by the wind, a flicker above her head before complete darkness. "Beautiful," he said out loud, realizing he'd been smiling all along.

Shaking death out of his pores, Brian stared at his murderous claws, the blackening skin of his arms as tough as leather with glistening scales all the way up. The alluring change impossible to ignore.

"He'll be happy as a clown," a boy chanted behind him. "Happy as a clown with no more frown!" The sing-song at arms' reach, but nowhere to be seen.

"And then the clown, you'll become," said another boyish voice, coming from the opposite side of the tent. "And then all will be done!"

A match ignited and a soft glow illuminated two faces, but then again, who could tell from all the hair? Wolf-boys, nothing but human cubs with fur covered skin, yellow eyes reflecting light like the moon, and naked in the dark.

"Bri-boy doesn't know the surprise!" called the first, as the second continued, "The only way to never wear the clown's disguise!" When they laughed, it sounded like howls and smelled like a full moon.

For a second, Brian wondered how they'd taste after hours cooked over a fire, but something tugged at his heart, making it ache. "There's a way out?" A part of him wanted to kill, but the other wanted to survive; none of them wanted to see Debbie's corpse slowly rotting as maggots devoured her flesh.

"Have you never been to a carnival, before?" asked one of the boys. "If you had, you'd have known there's always a second door." They blew out the match, plunging the tent into blackness again.

"What is it?" Brian asked, hating the sound of need in his trembling voice. His entire body shook, from his clown shoes to his claws and bulbous nose, rattling his teeth and bones; an internal earthquake trying to stop him from asking. "Tell me how to get out of here with my friends alive." His thoughts turned to Polly, of how he loved to hold her close and watch her laugh. "I want them to be alive." But what he meant was her. Only her.

The girl who dragged him here, trapping him to an endless spiderweb of insanity. The girl he'd have all for himself, Polly would be his.

A match cracked next to Brian, its light enough to make him blink. From up-close, the wolf-boys looked more feral than human, identical twins with pointy teeth and ears. Drool covered their chins, the stink of wet dog overwhelming.

"Think long and hard about the task to do," sang the first. "For all of your nightmares to never come true," finished the other.

"I hate riddles," he whispered. But then anger took over and he couldn't stop it, didn't want to. "I hate carnivals and I hate clowns!" Brian yelled at them, his breath blowing the flame out. His mind stopped spinning, he growled, "The clown."

"Eureka, genius!" chanted the wolf-boys, their giggles dissolving into howling fits. In complete darkness, their laughter came from above and below, ghostly and surreal. "Now that you know who to look for…" started one. "Catch him before he bleeds them more!" said the second, with bite.

"How do I do that? I can't see him, most of the time." Brian touched his nose, growing larger by the minute. "How do I catch him before it's too late?"

A sharp pang pierced his heart, like nails dragging it down into his toes. Could he live a killer's life? No more friends, only haunting memories of people he used to know, but wanted to murder. Not the way I want to live - no way.

"I don't want this. I don't want any of this." What he forgot to mention was how he loved the darkness consuming him as much as the smell of blood on his hands, of how he wanted to lick them raw.

"Hang him by the toe," sang the first. "Feed him to the crow," chanted the second. "Burn him 'til the glow," continued one. "And end his bloody show," ended the other. A match lit, but it reflected no faces in its circle of light: only darkness and the ruffle of footsteps running away from the tent, running away from him.

Brian snapped a thanks to the nothingness before him and wondered why he bothered asking those stupid kids about something they'd obviously made up. This was

no riddle, but some ridiculous song they'd invented on the spot to make him want to kill them just a little bit more.

He looked at Debbie's empty vessel and wondered what would have happened if he'd refused to kill her. How would the clown have reacted? Brian also wondered if the clown knew about his one weakness: Polly.

"Only one way to find out," he said to himself, throwing back the tent's flap as he entered the night, looking for his friends while searching for the clown. All the while, he wondered who would win between his old self and the killer he'd slowly become.

Chapter Nine

Rebecca Besser

Brian kept to the shadows as he moved through the carnival; he felt more comfortable there and he didn't want people to see his metamorphosis. He didn't want or need the extra attention. He had tasks to perform and he didn't need to be interrupted by some random patron enjoying this fucked up place.

Kill the clown… Kill my friends… Kill the clown… Kill my friends… The two options spun in a mad circle in his head, just like the cars of the tilt-a-whirl as he passed them. He was shocked the ride was still running, with everything that was going on. Hadn't anyone noticed the crowd and the murder? Mack's body was surely still in the bumper car on full display…

As he got closer, he realized the line to the tilt-a-whirl was on the other side of the ride and that the crowd of gawkers pretending to be concerned was blocking the view of anyone from that direction. He also noticed Brad trying to work his way through the thick press of bodies between the two rides. The little geek kept glancing over his shoulder nervously, looking for him Brian assumed.

Did the little bastard watch me kill Debbie? He wondered. *I can't let that little shit make it back to the group. He'll tell. He never fucking shuts up. He'll tell everyone and I won't be able to do what needs to be done. I won't be able to get to the clown, to kill him in time to save… my Polly.*

He looked down at himself, at the changes. The shoes made it hard for him to move and there was no way he could let people see him like this – half-himself, half-clown. He needed to hide it and he needed to silence Brad.

The deal to conceal the changes in exchange for compliance made sense to him in that moment. He had to kill Brad to keep him quiet. He had to be himself to even have a chance at killing the clown. He wasn't sure he wanted to give up the claws – they were useful – when he went up against *Asshole McScary*, as he now thought of the clown, but he didn't feel he had a choice. He had to kill, and he had to do it willingly.

With the decision consciously made to kill one of his friends, he transformed inside. His vision blurred and his soul went silent. He didn't feel like himself anymore. He was no longer home. It scared the shit out of him that he might not make it back to himself in time to save Polly. A vision of her face in bright sunlight, smiling happily, was the last clear thought he had before he gave completely in to what needed to be done. He would murder.

Blood lust ran hot through his veins and even the thoughts of hunting the clown momentarily vanished.

"*Kill the fucktard!"* the evil voice in his head taunted. "*You've always wanted to, just to shut him up. He's a sick bastard… You want him punching his pud to more of his Polly pics? Gut him and rip his eyeballs out! He won't be able to enjoy the pictures after that!"*

Brian's blood pulsed hot; it seeped from his thigh wounds almost burning the flesh of his calves as he began stalking his prey. Delicious ideas of ripping Brad apart bit by bit got him excited. He began to pant as he moved faster from shadow to shadow, tent to food cart, to ride, to tent. His over-exaggerated, awkward movements – which was the essence of the clown – would have been funny to anyone who saw him, and would have frightened Brian if he was still in his right mind.

Once again, all the sounds and noises surrounding him faded into silence. He moved as if alone in the world, focused only on the scared face of Brad as he glanced back and tried to move through a crowd that didn't want to be parted in any way. He couldn't help but laugh when a large jock grabbed Brad and threw him to the ground after he'd bumped into his girlfriend. The laugh was a clown laugh, but was void of all humor.

Asshole McScary laughed in his head at the same time, causing a chill to go down Brian's back. He realized what a fine line he was treading, but he couldn't stop; the risk was too high.

The maniacal, rabid killer inside Brian took the opportunity of Brad's humiliation on the ground to slither around a food stand and make it to the other side of the crowd. He hunched down in the darkness behind a large tent that had seen better days. He waited there, panting and watching for Brad to break through.

He didn't have to wait long.

Brad broke free of the throng of people, and just as he burst through, the sound came back on for Brian; it was if the world pulsed with his urge to kill. His ears were sharp, listening, waiting, and watching for just the right moment. Brad gave it to him easily. Thinking he was free from danger since he'd made it with no sign of Brian following, he leaned his hand against the back of the food cart and sucked in big panting, whimpering breaths. Brian was so close, he could smell the vomit and fear that clung to the hacker. He relished it. He breathed it in. He took strength from it. The darkness growing inside him was more intoxicating than he'd ever imagined it could be.

Brad closed his eyes and focused on returning his breathing to normal, and as he opened them again, he saw his girlfriend and friends standing huddled together in the distance. He straightened with a relieved smile on his face. In an attempt to get their attention so he could warn them of the real danger, he called out: "Hey!"

Just as the word left his mouth, Brian pounced, gripped Brad by the throat, squeezed hard enough to silence him, and dragged his tired and fear paralyzed body under the edge of the nearby tent.

"Going to tell on me, you little fuck?" Brian snarled in Brad's ear as he drew him to a standing position in the dark storage area of the tent they'd entered.

Brad made a gurgling noise and clawed at the hand encircling his throat.

Brian squeezed harder, digging his long, black nails into Brad's tender flesh, sniffing loudly at the blood that was shed. He groaned. He wanted to taste the blood, he wanted it so badly. He tried to fight it, but within moments he relented. It was too close,

too fresh, to ignore. He licked a rivulet of red liquid from the side of Brad's neck and shivered with devilish delight at the flavor and feel of the blood in his mouth.

"*My child*," Asshole McScary said in a proud voice only Brian could hear, "*you're going to be my best addition to the carnival ever*."

Brian closed his eyes, trying to fight off the pleasure those reassuring words gave him, and when he opened them again, he saw Asshole McScary and Hannah standing off in the shadows. She was licking her lips while watching him and tugging at her clothes like they were making her too hot and she wanted rid of them. More pleasure and excitement sang through him at her actions.

In a blink, they were both gone and he was alone once more with Brad. He loosened his grip just enough to allow the computer geek a couple of gasps of air before he tightened his hand once again.

"Do you think I'd let you tell on me?" Brian growled, shaking Brad violently as he spoke. "I'm going to kill you."

Brad thrashed harder.

Brian laughed the clown laugh; Asshole McScary joined in again, in his head.

A filthy tarp to the right of where they were standing was moved aside by a tiny hand.

Brian's head jerked in that direction. His eyes were sharp with a predator's lust, so he easily spotted the pale appendage and flutter of fabric.

Two bright green eyes stared at him through the slit, and briefly shifted to Brad before coming back to rest on him again.

He hissed loudly and took a step toward the tarp and the intruder, dragging Brad with him.

Brian heard a giggle, and the tarp was pulled back further to reveal a little girl with golden blonde hair, in a frilly pink dress. She had a beard… a thick one that hung almost to her waist. At the tip of it a pink ribbon was tied in a bow; it matched her dress perfectly.

"Whatcha playin'?" she asked.

Brian laughed his clown laugh again. "I'm not playin', I'm killin'!"

The little girl giggled again and stroked her beard. "That's my favorite game," she said, and walked slowly over to Brian. She looked up at Brad, who was almost blue from lack of oxygen. "You might want to let him breathe."

Brian, taking note that his victim was indeed dying before his time, loosened his grip for a moment to let him have a couple gulps of air.

The girl looked up at Brian with her big innocent eyes, blinked twice, grinned, and asked, "Can you make him scream? I want to hear him scream!"

Brian shook his head no. "I have to keep this quiet or the others will hear."

The girl huffed and pouted.

"You don't want them to get away before it's their turn to play, do you?" Brian teased, and winked down at her.

She blinked a couple more times, and then giggled. She shook her head no, and glanced back up at Brad. “Can I watch him bleed?”

“Gretchen!” a loud male voice boomed from the other side of the tarp the girl had come through. “You’re on! People want to see your beautiful beard! Where are you?”

Brian raised an eyebrow and looked at the girl.

She shrugged, sighed, and said, “I have to go perform now. I’ll come back when I’m done.”

“He’ll be dead by then,” Brian said, and grinned.

“That’s okay,” she said, grinning in return. “Sit him in that chair when you’re done, so I can play tea party later.” She pointed behind Brian, into the corner.

He turned his head to see a small wooden table and chair set sitting in the darkness. The set was made of rough scraps of splintered wood that had been nailed together; it reminded him of what a normal set might look like in the funhouse mirrors.

He nodded as he looked back to the little girl. She smiled happily and skipped over to the tarp, pulled it back, and went through.

The part of Brian that was still him realized there was something completely fucked up about the entire encounter. The ravenous killing beast that had taken over preened as if it had just promised its favorite niece a cookie.

Brian returned his attention to Brad. Without further ado, he raised his free claw-tipped hand, spread his fingers wide, and gutted the geek from crotch to throat. Five bright red gashes marred the front of Brad’s pristinely clean clothes.

He dug his fingers behind Brad’s eyes and, with a sadistic grin, ripped them out.

“That’s for Polly,” he whispered, closing his fist around Brad’s eyes as he bled to death.

Brad’s intestines started to slip out, but got stuck on the thin scraps of skin still intact – dangling and dripping. The viscera looked like garland strung on a Christmas tree and Brian couldn’t help but be amused.

Remembering his promise to the girl, he dragged Brad’s body over to one of the small chairs in the corner. He released the body into it, placing Brad’s eyes on the table and then flopped Brad’s body over on top of them.

“Yum, yum!” he said, and laughed.

“*Well done!”* Asshole McScary said from right behind him, and began clapping. It was a dry sound – slow and methodical. “*You keep this up and you’ll be at home here in no time. I’ll keep my promise. You just keep up the good work.*”

Brian tried to turn and face the clown, but the world around him spun and he felt nauseous. He fell face first onto the straw-covered floor. Blackness closed in on him and all he could hear was the clown’s voice. His body convulsed as pain sang through him, making him gasp and causing him to spasm.

***

When Brian came back to himself minutes later, he opened his eyes to see two pink buckle shoes in front of his face. He cried out, rolled onto his back, and sat up swiftly.

He heard a little girl giggle. He froze. He knew who it was… Gretchen.

He spun, turned his head, and sure enough, big green eyes were looking back into his own.

“Thank you, thank you!” she squealed, and gave him a hug.

He flinched as she squeezed him, realizing he was sore all over. The adrenaline and fear from the moment of returning to consciousness evaporated to leave him in the shell of his misery: his body.

Gretchen left the speechless Brian to prance over to the table and chair set. She clasped her hands in front of herself as if she didn’t know what to do with the wonderful present in front of her.

Brian turned slightly to watch her, and the memories of what he’d done came crashing back down on him. He hated himself. He wanted to be sick.

Gretchen moved closer to Brad’s corpse and put her little hands on each of his shoulders to sit him back in his chair. At that moment, she realized he’d been face down on his eyes at the table. She gasped.

“You naughty, greedy boy!” she admonished, and slapped him hard across the face.

Brad’s body slumped over in the chair from the force of the blow. She giggled and looked at Brian, her eyes shining with excitement.

“You even made us a snack!” she squealed.

In an instant, she was in another chair. She reached forward, grabbed what was lying on the table in both hands, and brought them up to her mouth. She took a huge bite, tearing with her teeth while pulling back with her hands. Skin stretched and then snapped. She chewed and swallowed. Vitreous fluid ran down her beard and dripped onto her dress.

Brian hunched over and vomited on the straw covered floor.

“Ew!” Gretchen said, around a mouthful of raw ocular muscle. “That’s gross.” She chewed for a moment and swallowed. “If you’re going to do that, go outside!” She took another bite.

“Sorry…” Brian muttered, and crawled under the side of the tent to go outside.

Out in the open air of the night, he came face to toe with a clown shoe.

Chapter Ten

Armand Rosamilia

Asshole McScary tapped his giant shoe on the ground and sighed dramatically. "*Get up, Bri-boy, and stop throwing up on everything. It's getting to be gross, and I'm not going to clean up your messes for the rest of your life. Time for you to be a man."*

"This is getting out of hand," Brian said as he got up on one knee and wiped his mouth with his blackened fingers. His stomach convulsed again.

The clown waved his hands and laughed. *"Out of hand? I get it. Bri-boy made a joke. Haha."* He wiggled his fingers and shook his hands violently. *"Anything with jazz hands, right?"*

Brian stood and felt nauseous, and for a second he thought he was going to pass out. He just wanted to go back to being normal, but his giant shoes and black claws told him otherwise. He was a changed man, and he hoped Polly would understand.

"*Polly? Forget her for a second and focus. There's still plenty of work to do. Now, my math skills haven't always been the best in class, but I'm thinking there are still some living friends you need to deal with.*" The clown put up one of his gloved hands and wiggled his six fingers. He gripped one of them and yanked hard, blood shooting into the air. "*Erin is left?"* Another finger and more blood. *"Sandy?*"

The blood was angling at Brian, who jumped out of the way.

"Agnes and Terrence are still alive. Unacceptable," the clown said and ripped two more fingers off, leaving a thumb and what was probably a middle finger. He pulled and pulled on the thumb before it popped loose, gore dripping from the hand. *"This is Polly."*

"No way," Brian said. "Never."

The clown grinned evilly and held up the last finger, giving Brian the bird. *"Then you have some work to do, Bri-boy. I'd start with Terrence. Then you can deal with all the bitches."*

"Terrence is harmless."

The clown laughed. *"Are you serious? Was he harmless in first grade when he kissed Polly?"*

Brian didn't understand. He couldn't speak.

"Did you ever ask innocent little Polly who her first kiss was with? It was with that pencil-necked geek friend of yours. Ha, some friend. Do you think he doesn't remember his first kiss with her? The taste of her lips? I'm sure she was a sweet piece even then. I wonder if she still savors that kiss?"

"Bullshit."

"I wish it weren't the truth, Bri-boy… although, it is kinda fun to be the one to break it to you. I gotta be honest. His girlfriend Agnes is a damn mess as well. Did you know her and Terrence haven't even done it yet? You know why? Because she's a damn bible-thumper."

"No, she's not."

"Of course she is. Look at her clothes, dude. She is a prude. Big time. Terrence covers for her, and the two of them play it nicely. Seriously."

Brian felt the rage surging through his body and his entire form changing once again. It was getting easier to do each time, and while it was scary on some level to know another part of his old self was dying, it was a welcoming feeling.

"I'll kill them," Brian said.

"That's the spirit." The clown put up his hand. *"There's only one problem I see."*

"What?" Brian was ready to run at the couple and rip them apart regardless of who saw him.

The clown shrugged. *"Who names their kid Terrence in this day and age? What a stupid name. Before you kill him, make sure you call him Terry. It will let him die with an ounce of dignity. As he's pissing himself and begging for his life."*

***

Terrence gripped Agnes by the hand as they began walking. All he wanted to do was leave, go home and pretend this night never happened. People were dying and he was blending into the background. All his friends were dead or acting weird, and he wanted no part of it. Most of all, he wanted to live and he knew if he stayed he'd end up dead. And so would Agnes.

“Where are we going? We can't just leave everyone,” Agnes said. "The cops will be here soon. I can't believe there are still people wandering around playing games and going on rides like nothing happened. This is crazy. But we need to stay with the group.”

"No, we need to find the exit. Someone called the police, and they'll be here soon enough. I don’t want to wait around." Terrence was trying to be calm and firm in his determination, but he pulled his hand away from his girlfriend's because it was starting to shake. He didn't want her to see him freaking out and especially after the other night, when he'd panicked as she'd touched his crotch in the backseat of his car. He was amazed she was still interested in going out with him, but she'd said it was no big deal. Terrence still felt like an ass. Now, with everything going on, he needed to be strong and brave for her.

"I don't want to run out on my friends," Agnes said.

And there it was, Terrence thought. *I've done the wrong thing by abandoning them and looking like a wimp. Damn*. "We're not, Agnes. We just need to go get help. What if the police and ambulance show up and can't find their way to the scene of the accident?"

Agnes began sobbing. "There wasn't an accident. People are being killed."

"Francis jumped."

"Did he?" Agnes asked, shaking her head. "It all happened so quickly. And now with Mack dead… none of it makes any sense." She looked at a couple walking hand in hand nearby, smiling and sharing deep-fried Oreo cookies. "What is wrong with people? What is wrong with this carnival? You think they'd shut down!"

Terrence saw red lights flashing a couple of rows over and he pointed. "There! The cops are finally here. Let's lead them back to Mack."

The couple ran through the crowd, keeping the flashing lights in sight. When they got to the aisle, though, they saw it was just the Strength Testing game. A midget puffing on a cigar smiled at Terrence and leered at Agnes. "Win something for your hot babe there, buddy?"

"No, we thought…"

The midget hefted the oversized hammer, looking like something out of a cartoon. He took a puff of the cigar and blew it at Terrence. It lingered around Terrence's stomach before dissipating. "You thought you would let the hot chick win something for you? Wow, dude, you're pretty lame."

"No, not at all," Terrence said. The little man was pissing him off. *Midget*, he thought. *Or was it little person?* He didn't know what the proper term was. Maybe he was a dwarf? "We're just in a hurry. The cops should be here soon."

"Doubtful." The midget walked up to Agnes and took her hand. "Look, if your boyfriend is too much of a wimp to win you something, maybe you need a new boyfriend." The midget glanced at Terrence and grinned. "I'm sure I could handle you. He might even be gay, let's be honest."

Terrence wanted to punch the little dick. He took Agnes by her other hand. "Come on, honey, we need to get out of here."

Agnes was staring at the giant stuffed animals around the game. "I want a polar bear."

"Polar bears are stupid," Terrence blurted. This was not going as planned. They needed to get out of the carnival and drive home. He wanted to take her to safety.

The midget pulled Agnes away from him and put a hand around her thigh, grinning at Terrence as he did so. "Let's go win you something nice, baby."

"Wait. Agnes, please…"

Agnes pointed at a large pink polar bear. "I want this one."

The midget laughed and twirled the cigar in his stubby fingers after he put the hammer down. "I can't just give it to you, though, honey. There are rules to the carnival we must all obey, or else absolute chaos will prevail. You need a champion to slam the hammer down, ring the bell, and then you can take whichever one you like."

Agnes turned to Terrence. "Will you win me a stuffed polar bear?"

"We don't have time for this," Terrence said. "We really need to get going."

"I told you he was gay. Cutie, if I wasn't working I'd win you ten of them and trade them for a kiss," the midget said.

"Don't talk to her like that," Terrence said. The situation was getting even more out of control.

"She doesn't seem to mind," the midget said. "Not at all."

"We're leaving. I will buy you a stuffed animal when we get to safety," Terrence said.

"It doesn't work like that," the midget said. "You'll only impress this hottie if you win the damn thing." He turned to the passing crowd. "Anyone want to win her a stuffed polar bear and get in her pants?"

"I would love to," Brian said as he stepped forward with a wicked smile.

***

Brian could smell the fear emanating from Terrence and he took it in with his giant red nose. His hands were dripping black now, pooling on the ground around his floppy shoes.

"Brian, what is wrong with you? Why are you dressed like that?"

Brian shrugged. "I'm getting used to it. Don't you think it's a good look for me?" Brian raised his arms and grinned. "I'm hoping I can get a smaller pair of shoes, and maybe change the color up, especially on weekends. You can't really go to church in white shoes after Labor Day. Is that still a rule?"

"You aren't making any sense and you're scaring us," Terrence said.

"Us? I think it's just you." The midget patted Agnes on the ass. "My new girlfriend seems to be distracted by the pretty lights and the stuffed animals. You're the only one acting like a douche."

Brian picked up the hammer and hefted it in his hands. He liked the feel of the large weapon in his blackened grip. "I accept your challenge, Terrence."

"I never said anything about a challenge."

"I'll even let you go first," Brian said and handed him the hammer.

"I'm not doing this. We have to leave," Terrence said.

"Then you give up. Fine," the midget said and put a hand on the hammer. "But the girl is then lost. She stays with the winner, buddy."

Brian chuckled at Terrence. He thought he was going to cry. He couldn't remember why he was even friends with Terrence. He was soft and weak. Brian turned to Agnes and wanted nothing more than to see her die. She wasn't getting anywhere near his Polly.

"Rules are rules." The midget let go of the hammer. "Step right up and see if you're a man, even though I already know the answer."

Terrence was babbling, pleading with Brian to not do this.

"Your turn. Make it count." Brian smiled. "Your life depends on it."

Terrence went to the game, a look of determination on his face. "If I win you'll let us go? Agnes and I can leave?"

"Sure, why not?" Brian clapped his gloved hands. He was having fun with the myriad changes his outfit was going through and his body. "If you win you can even get her a stuffed polar bear."

Without another word, Terrence swung the hammer over his head and struck the plate. The red globe shot up through the air, momentum carrying it higher and higher.

"Wow. Nice, gotta tell ya," the midget said.

The globe slammed into the bell on top and rang out, lights flashing and the game making noises.

Terrence laughed in relief. "I did it! I actually did it."

Agnes ran over to him and hugged him, kissing his cheek. "You won me a stuffed animal, Terrence!"

"Not yet," the midget said and took the hammer from him. "There's still Bri-boy's turn."

"Don't call me that," Brian growled.

"Lighten up." The midget stepped aside. "Don't waste your energy of me. You need to ring the bell."

Brian grabbed the hammer and swung it around in his hands. He liked the weight of it. "Is everyone ready to see magic?"

"Just hurry up so we can leave," Terrence said.

Brian stepped up, placing his floppy shoes to either side of the game. He lifted the hammer over his head and concentrated. Brian swung down in a nice arc, striking the plate solidly.

The globe shot up and smashed into the bell, ringing it. Brian laughed in glee as the music began and the lights started flashing.

"Now what?" Terrence asked, glancing toward an exit. "We're wasting so much time."

Brian shrugged and looked at the midget. "What's the rules?"

The midget was staring at Agnes and licking his lips. "Normally… we'd keep going until someone missed. But we don’t have time for that, right?"

Terrence shook his head. "No, we certainly do not."

"Then we go to the old carnie rules. It's the only way," the midget said.

"What does it mean?" Brian asked. He didn't like the sound of it.

The midget smiled and looked at the hammer. "In baseball, tie goes to the runner. In the carnival, tie goes to the man with the floppy shoes."

Brian smiled at the sight of Terrence grimacing.

"Looks like you lose… loser," the midget said and pointed at Terrence.

Brian hefted the hammer overhead. "See ya around, Terry." He struck his friend on the top of his head, driving him to the ground.

Agnes screamed, the spell broken.

Brian turned to the midget. "Drag Agnes into the tent so I can finish her."

"Her? Damn waste if you ask me," the midget said and obeyed, awkwardly lifting Agnes over his shoulder.

Brian smiled when he saw blood pouring from Terrence's head but he was still breathing. Brian tossed him over his shoulder, still carrying the hammer, and followed the midget to a safer place.

Chapter Eleven

Jon Olson

"Come on, darlin'," the midget said. He was struggling to carry her through the open flap on the tent. "You're making me break out in a sweat and for all the wrong reasons."

Agnes stopped screaming when she realized no one was paying any attention to her but still fought for her life. Judging by the way the midget had been grinning and running over her with his eyes, there was no doubt in her mind that he had something else on his mind besides killing. There was no way she was going to let the fucking Munchkin have any chance of getting his way.

With Brian lurking after them, she knew she wouldn't stand a chance fighting the two of them off at the same time. She looked down at the midget struggling to carry her and knew she could easily overpower him. All at once she stopped resisting and the two of them stumbled into the tent. He dropped her to the grass covered ground and quickly pulled the tent flap down giving them privacy.

Although it was dark inside the tent, it wasn't pitch black. Back at the far corner there was a single candle sitting on a small wooden crate with its flame gently flickering. A thick and foul odor clogged her nostrils like that of a person in dire need of a shower and Agnes felt like she was on the verge of vomiting, but she bit her tongue and held it together. With the music from games and the rides all around, it was difficult to hear much of anything inside the tent, but for a split second she thought she heard a wet smacking sound coming from the back corner where the candle was.

Before she could do anything, Agnes felt a blow to the middle of her back and she was forced onto the ground. The midget was upon her and climbed up to her shoulders where he leaned in close to her ear.

"We're going to have a quick round of fun before Bri-boy gets here," he said. His breath smelled of cigars and fermented fruit. When Agnes didn't struggle the midget let his guard down. He leaned to her ear again. "I knew it. That little sissy boy never pleasured you. Now it's time for a real man to make you feel like a woman."

Agnes waited as the midget tugged at her shirt and when he took his hands off of her to undo his own she swung her right elbow back with all her might. It struck him in the face and he rolled off of her.

"Not a chance, Frodo!" she said.

"You fucking bitch!" he yelled clutching his right eye. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small knife.

As he struggled to stand, Agnes was already on her feet running toward the back of the tent hoping, *praying*, there was another way out. A large stack of crates stood in the middle of the tent and she ducked in behind them then stopped dead in her tracks.

The smell of his body odor hit her first, almost knocking the wind out of her. Sitting a few feet away from the candle was the fattest man she had ever seen. Whatever he was seated upon could not be identified let alone seen as it was completely engulfed by the large and multiple skin folds. His skin glistened in the candle light as sweat ran down it, similar to lava flowing down a volcano. The man's enormous breasts each hung off to the sides with perspiration dripping from the tips of his nipples.

It was then that Agnes noticed that he was holding something in his hands. It was a jar and he had just removed the lid when she came around the crates.

"Normally… I don't… share…" he gasped between each set of words, "but you're… pretty… would you… like some?" With great effort he lifted the jar off of his naked lap and held it out to her with his arms jiggling. What she saw in the jar caused her to clasp her hand over her mouth.

Inside in a liquid resembling pickle juice was the large eyed baby from the Freak Show tent. The fat man smiled and Agnes could see green juice staining the corners of his mouth. Her eyes drifted to the ground and she saw three empty jars along with two more full ones sitting at his feet.

***

Dragging a body with these retarded clown shoes is a pain in the ass, Brian thought.

The people visiting the carnival were making his work easier. After he had nailed Terrence in the head with the hammer and the midget went off with Agnes, the people who witnessed it actually cheered thinking it was all part of an act. He bowed and announced to them that it was a prop hammer and then, before Asshole McScary had to remind him he had work to do, he started to drag Terrence away. Every few steps a barely audible groan would escape Terrence's lips.

That little midget better not have fucked things up, Brian thought and then laughed. *The midget's task was a tall order.*

***

"Gotcha!" the midget said as he jumped around the crates and stabbed Agnes in her left leg. She cried out and stumbled backward landing on her butt, feeling warm blood seep out from the wound soaking through her pants. The midget was about to take a step toward her when he looked over at the fat man, noticing the jars.

"Harold," the midget said. "For fucksakes, do you know how hard it is to find the babies to fill those jars? It took us months before we found more to shove in there!"

Harold's smile faded and he looked like the fat kid in every grade who gets made fun of for their size. "Sorry Barkley… I was… hungry."

"You're hungry all the fucking time." Barkley said. He sighed. "We'll deal with that later. I don't suppose you can help me with her?"

Harold slowly shook his head no. "I'm too… tired… sorry."

Barkley looked down at Agnes. "I see you've met Harold or as he's more commonly known, The Fattest Man in the World." The expression on Barkley's face then

turned sinister. “I can tell by your look of disgust that you don’t think much of him or any of us, do you? *Do you*?”

Agnes was slowly inching backward, pushing off with her good leg while wincing from the stab wound in the other. Her eyes looked down at the blood slowly dripping off of the blade Barkley was holding.

“We could’ve had some fun, you and I, but you ruined any chance of that. Hell, now I’m feeling downright nasty. I may cut a piece of you off and feed it to Harold while you watch.” Barkley started to walk toward her.

Agnes felt lose dirt underneath her hands as the grass floor gave way to a bare patch. She dug her fingers into it as deep as she could and curled them up into a fist clutching the earth. Barkley was almost upon her now and even though the candle was behind him, his eyes seemed to reflect a hellish glow of fire. Just as he was about to lunge at her, she threw the fistful of dirt into his eyes. He howled and staggered backward while Agnes climbed to her feet.

“Fuck off back to Oz, Munchkin!” she yelled.

She took two steps and kicked with her right foot and all of her might. The laces of her shoe connected with the midget’s crotch and she felt his testicles rupture as he flew backward in the air like a football. It was Agnes who yelled out though in excruciating pain as her ankle snapped on contact. Her scream almost rose above the music and sounds of the rides and games as she fell to the ground and looked in horror has her foot hung awkwardly from her ankle.

Quite a few feet away Barkley was face down on the ground and not moving.

“Are… you… okay?” Harold asked in between chews. He extended his right hand to help her to her feet while he clutched the remnants of the large eyed baby. Although repulsed, Agnes grabbed onto his hand and hauled herself to her left foot. Despite his incredible size and unrelenting appetite, Agnes detected decency in Harold. She was about to thank him when a voice cut through the tent.

“Hey! Midget!” Brian called from the front of the tent. “Where are you?”

“Please… Harold… I need your help. Is there another way out of here?” she whispered.

Harold shook his massive head and swallowed the rest of the large eyed baby.

“You better not have fucked things up!” Brian called out.

His voice sounded incredibly close and Agnes grabbed one of the two remaining jars on the ground knowing Brian would appear from behind the crates at any second. Inside was the baby that had a third leg growing out its back. Harold started moaning, almost sobbing, and was reaching for it when Brian came around the crates.

“What in the Hell is going on?” he asked.

Agnes threw the jar and it struck Brian high in the chest. The glass exploded with the green juice spraying out all over his Green Day Tee-shirt while the baby bounced off Brian and onto the ground. The blow sucked the air out of Brian’s lungs. Agnes turned and took off, hopping around the other side of the crates. She could hear both Harold

wailing at the wasted snack and Brian coughing, struggling to catch his breath. With each hop, Agnes let out cries of both pain and determination. She could see the edges of the tent flaps in front of her.

She was getting close.

"*Agnes*!" Brian roared.

Getting closer.

Brian came tearing around the crates, clutching the hammer and started to sprint after her.

Even closer.

Agnes put all she had into her one good leg.

Almost there.

His breathing was loud and was getting louder as he gained on her.

Almost there.

Three hops away something suddenly latched onto her good leg and she tripped crying out knowing her chance to escape was gone. Whatever had latched on was small, smaller than Barkley. She looked down and saw the three-legged baby. It let out a high-pitched inhuman scream telling Brian it had stopped her.

Brian ran up and stood over her gasping for breath.

"I must say," he said. "You're much tougher than Terrence ever was." He sucked in a large gulp of air then spat on the ground. "Now I know why you guys never did it. If I was in your shoes, I wouldn't want some sissy making love to me."

"Go to Hell," Agnes cried.

"There's no *Hell*," Brian said lifting the hammer above his head. "There's only *carnival*."

With unnatural strength Brian brought the hammer down not once, but twice. The first struck Agnes between the shoulder blades fracturing her spinal column. She screamed but it didn't last long as he brought the hammer down again this time onto her head. Her skull caved in and brain matter spilled out onto the grass. There was a break in the carnival music outside and it was quiet. Only Brian's breathing and Harold's sobs could be heard. He felt something clutching his pant leg and looked down.

The three-legged baby was looking up at him with the cutest pair of doe eyes; a light shade of green with irises of dark yellow. The baby's skin was the color of dead grass and there were only a few strands of hair on its head. Its third leg extended from the back and had the same full range of motion that the other legs had. Brian reached down and lifted it onto his shoulder where it held on.

"I thought you guys were all dead," he muttered. "At least fake." It pressed its head against Brian's, similar to a cat rubbing against its master's leg.

He stepped over what was left of Agnes and stopped beside Terrence who was struggling to regain consciousness. The hammer started to rise then stopped. Harold's sobs gave Brian an idea and he dragged Terrence the entire length of the tent back to where the fat man was sitting only stumbling once with the clown shoes. He pulled the

body up until Terrence was within Harold's reach. Brian looked at Harold and noticed that the tears had quickly been erased by the never ending flow of sweat.

"Here you go, big guy," Brian said.

A smile pushed Harold's chubby cheeks out. "You mean… he's all… for me?"

"I insist. He's more useful now than he ever was as a so-called man."

"Thank… you." Harold said.

He had already reached over his massive gut and grabbed onto Terrence's arm. Brian stared in both amazement and disgust as Harold fit Terrence's entire hand into his mouth then chomped down through tissue, ligaments and bone. The only sounds escaping Terrence's mouth were moans and after a couple more bites, he fell silent. Harold smacked his lips happily as he fed.

"*Hey Bri-boy,*" Asshole McScary voice resonated inside Brian's head. "*By my count you still have three left. I suggest you leave this fat bastard and get to it*."

Brian turned and started to walk away from the fat man consuming another human being. He looked down at Barkley who was still lying face down on the ground. Brian had to give it to Agnes, she had put up quite the fight. He nudged the midget with his foot and Barkley slowly came around.

"Jesus that hurt," Barkley said. He gingerly got to his feet and gently massaged his groin as best he could.

"Since you couldn't even take care of a girl, make sure that fat fucker eats what's left of that guy." Brian said pointing to Terrence.

"I think she broke my balls." Barkley said.

"Hey! I don't give a shit. Just make sure Terrence is gone before you leave this tent. Got it?"

Barkley nodded and limped back to Harold mumbling under his breath.

"*Is it really necessary for him to come?*" Asshole McScary asked. The three-legged baby was still standing on Brian's shoulder.

"No." Brian said.

He grabbed the baby who let out a startled wail and threw it to Harold who caught it and promptly consumed it between bites of Terrence.

Chapter Twelve

Brent Abell

Erin ducked behind the gathering carnival-goers and watched in horror at the scene before her. Brian, the boy who she'd known since they were in pre-school, finished beating Terrence with the large mallet and his small statured friend grabbed Agnes as they disappeared into the old faded canvas tent. All around her, the crowd erupted in applause and cheers, chanting for an encore to the display of brutal violence they thought was part of the act.

But she knew better.

She knew Brian had done horrible things since they arrived at the carnival earlier in the evening, and they weren't a part of the show. In her mind, the image of the wooden mallet striking Terrence in the head wouldn't go away. Neither would the wet thud it made with each whack to his cranium. The horrific cries from Agnes as the midget tossed her up on his shoulder and carried her off into the dark tent still rang in her ears and no matter how hard she tried it echoed in her mind, refusing to go away.

The crowd around her grew more restless and chanted louder the longer Brian stayed inside the tent. Her feet were frozen to the ground and her mind reeled while trying to process what she had seen. Everything she thought she knew about her friend crumbled around her and she felt confused by it all.

How could Brian do something like that to Terrence and Agnes? It had to be him who killed Francis, Mack, and the others; she thought and fought back the tears building behind her eyes.

"See something you like?" a familiar voice whispered to her from the dark recesses around the tents behind her.

"Brian?" she hesitantly asked.

"Kind of, I'm much more now than I ever was," he answered back. Erin heard something cold and foreign in his tone. Most people wouldn't have noticed it, but she detected it immediately, and it wasn't the Brian she knew answering.

"What the hell is going on? Where are Terrence and Agnes?" She tried to keep her voice down, but anger began to mix with the fear rushing through her system and she felt herself on the edge of madness.

Brian stepped out from the shadows and waved his hands in the air like he was shooing away a pesky fly. The crowd standing around the tent seemed to forget why they were gathered outside the *Largest Man on Earth's* tent and began to wander off. All the calls for an encore were forgotten as they dispersed back into the midway and were greeted with pitches for food, rides, and games from the barkers.

Erin felt the air around her grow heavy. In her chest, her heart hammered and her breath caught in her throat when her eyes looked upon her childhood friend. Dark black

circles surrounded his eyes, framing the blazing red orbs in his sockets. White splotches covered his arms and face, dotting most of his exposed flesh. Leaning in, she saw the skin around the splotches was shedding. His tan skin was flaking away, exposing new white flesh beneath. Even his nose appeared different. His once cute, button-like nose looked more rounded and the color brightened to a red hue. Strands of stringy and greasy hair hung limply in his face and gave his visage a more menacing look.

"Don't like what you see?" Brian asked.

"What are you?"

"I'm a part of the crew here now Erin. You should join us… We have cookies," he cackled and clapped his hands violently around in the air.

Erin's paralysis broke and she kicked wildly out at Brian. Her sandal struck him in the groin and he dropped to the ground howling in pain.

"Oh you bitch!" he cried out through his gritted teeth.

Sensing her chance, Erin ran. Diving out from behind the tent and onto the midway, she drove her legs as fast as she could go. The crowds around her blurred as she sped past them, away from the thing Brian had become. Erin dodged kids with cotton candy, lovers holding hands, and others who stopped in her path to watch her race by. Each breath began to burn and she felt her calves tighten.

"Gotta run faster darlin'," Brian whispered beside her and laughed loudly.

Erin screamed and forced her legs to go harder and faster. Her muscles ached and she wished she'd stayed in better shape after track season ended. Cautiously, she peeked to the right where she'd heard Brian's voice and saw him gliding beside her as if he floated on air.

"You'll never outrun me here, Erin. Stop and we can talk about this, it's not what it looks like," he pleaded.

Brian reached out to her and she spied the sharp black fingernails tearing through the ends of his ragged and bleeding fingers. He grabbed at her arm but she jerked away before he could catch her. He twisted to the side, off-balance, and slowed to keep from falling over. Erin saw the sign ahead that read *Funhouse*.

She didn't want to, but she dove into the place where Francis became the first of them to die. She only hoped she wouldn't be next.

***

Brian saw Erin rush into the funhouse and a smile crept across his face.

This is your chance Bri-boy. Go and kill the bitch, finish what you've started, the clown said in his head. He hated Asshole McScary, but he knew he couldn't stop now. The power flowing through him from the carnival gave him a rush and he found he needed to feed the high he felt even more.

He needed to be in full communion with the carnival. He needed to have access to its full power.

Brian stopped running and began walking toward the funhouse. The people of Blackburn moved around him like he wasn't there. One ability he'd quickly learned was

how to walk among the carnival goers unseen. When you had an evening full of killing your friends, it was a handy power to have.

I'll let her think I'm not coming for a bit, Brian thought and continued to the funhouse and its mirrored hallways. *Vain bitch is going to watch herself die in there.*

Brian laughed and stood outside the tent, keeping an eye on her watch. After a few minutes, he drew back the funhouse's tent flap and silently stepped inside.

***

Erin entered the Hall of Mirrors and looked at all the different versions of herself staring back for what seemed like an eternity. Some were fat, some thin, and some appeared as a series of ripples. The lights above her flickered and she heard the crackle of the electric current passing through the hastily set-up funhouse. Nothing else stirred or made noise as she tried to muffle back a sob.

"Come out, come out wherever you are." The words floated through the air and a loud cackling laugh followed.

Erin's blood ran cold. Quietly, she moved among the mirrored rows and each turn brought her back to where she was before.

"Erin? Help me, I can't feel anything."

She turned and frantically checked the mirrors surrounding her. The voice sounded like it came from right next to her. The stifling heat in the funhouse dissipated and goosebumps ran up and down her arms as the temperature dropped suddenly.

"Erin, I love you," the voice whispered.

"Mack?"

"Help me."

The mirror Erin stared at shimmered and ripples moved back and forth across the reflective surface. Dark shapes pulsated behind the glass and swirled wildly around. A face took shape in the reflection and after a few moments, Mack stared back at her.

"Oh my God," Erin muttered as tears began streaming down her cheeks.

"Help me Erin, I'm not dead," he said. His voice sounded muffled like he was speaking while being held underwater.

Erin rushed over and touched his face in the glass. The surface felt cold and when she ran her fingers along his cheek, she saw the gash across his throat. The ragged cut oozed blood and she thought about his dead body being pulled from the bumper cars. She remembered glancing back at Brian and watching the smile creep across his lips. She knew then he'd done it, but couldn't comprehend why.

"He's one of them now Erin," Mack answered, reading her thoughts.

"One of them?"

"Brian isn't himself anymore. Something here has poisoned him and that's why he killed me. He had to appease the carnival."

Erin felt the mirror warm to her touch and she pressed her fingertips harder against it. Mack smiled at her and he let out a laugh, forcing blood bubbles to form around the

gaping neck wound. His fingers reached up and touched hers from beyond the mirrored surface. Ripples washed across the surface again and Erin screamed.

Mack reached through the glass and grasped Erin's wrists. Silver reflective tendrils snaked from the mirror and wrapped around her fingers and arms. They constricted and dug deep in her flesh. The skin split and the tendrils sliced her to the bone. Her face contorted into a knot of pain and agony. Mack puckered his lips in a kiss and began to pull her in.

Erin wrenched back, trying to break free. With each attempt to escape, the tendrils bit further into her arms and blood poured from the gashes. Her fingertips crossed over into the mirror and a cold numbness rushed through her. She took one last glance in Mack's eyes and saw nothing of her lover remaining. Her heart sank and the fight left her as she succumbed to her dead boyfriend. Erin's body began passing through the mirror and she felt everything go frigid.

"Oh, what a lovely couple," a voice sneered behind Erin.

She tried to turn her head, but she only had passed half-way through the glass and couldn't move. Slowly, she was pulled completely into the mirror and the darkness swallowed her. All around her cries of sorrow and pain filled the space and the black seemed to go on forever. Mack embraced her and kissed her on the forehead.

"Part of the crew, part of the carnival," Mack whispered in her ear as he licked the salty tears from her face. "Now we are forever."

Erin turned back to the outside world and saw Brian standing there laughing. Leaning closer, he pressed his face to the surface and waved at her.

"Welcome to the show, Erin! None of you will ever leave here again," he sneered and made a fist.

The blow shook the mirror world and Erin lost her balance, falling to the ground. Brian rained blow after blow on the mirror and Erin saw cracks form in the surface.

"No, Brian! Stop! Help me!"

Brian stopped and stared at her through the glass. Something crossed his face and Erin thought she saw the old Brian flash in his eyes for a moment. He took a few deep breaths and lowered his fists to his sides.

"Brian, come back to us. I know you're still in there somewhere," Erin pleaded.

What the fuck Bri-boy? Finish her! The clown raged in his mind.

"Erin?" Brian's voice sounded small and weak. "I can't… Can't help it, I'm sorry."

Beside him, the mallet appeared. Erin recognized it as the one he'd beat Terrence with. Closing his eyes, Brian picked it up and swung it at the mirror as hard as he could. The mirror exploded in a shower of glass that rained down across the floor. In his head, he thought he could hear Erin as her being was shattered into thousands of pieces scattered on the funhouse floor.

Look.

Obeying Asshole McScary, Brian opened his eyes and the world looked different. The polish was removed and he saw the carnival for what it really was... A place of

horror. The mirrors surrounding him were full of his friends. Their cold dead eyes stared accusingly at him; their killer. Francis pointed his twisted broken finger at him and opened his mouth in a silent scream that stayed trapped beyond the mirror. Mack and Erin glared at him from inside another mirror, their bodies now a bloody mosaic of cobbled together glass.

Brian looked at each one and the magnitude of his actions sank in. Terrence and Agnes watched him from faces that looked like ground beef. Debbie stared at him through her stitched up eyes and Brad glared at him with the dark purple and black bruises from Brian's hands coloring his broken neck.

You're handiwork is most impressive Bri-boy. Look at each of them; they are your ticket to join us here. We've been expecting you, the clown's voice said.

Brian looked closer at his horrific reflection. He ran his fingers over the flesh peeling from his cheek and he took hold of an edge and pulled. The skin ripped from his face and he felt the clean white underneath.

"What have you done?" someone said behind him.

Brian turned and saw himself standing in the ring of mirrors.

"Who are you?" the clown Brian hissed.

"I'm you before the clown and this place poisoned you. Think, why does the voice in your head call you, Bri-boy?"

Francis called me that.

"Who plays hard to get with you in the carnival no matter how bad you want her?"

Polly?

"What about the one person you could always rely on to help you out of a jam?"

Mack?

"We could also talk about the girls you always wanted, but were afraid to ask out."

Debbie and Agnes?

"I'm still in you. Look around you, everything in the carnival has a parallel to our life."

"No, the carnival wants me! Its power is mine!" the clown Brian howled in rage.

The normal Brian stood and watched the other him thrash around in a fit.

"We can stop this here and now. Take my hand and we can leave here, everything will go back to normal."

"NO! This is for Polly!" the clown Brian roared and thrust his sharp claws into the other Brian. The razor tips sliced deep into his body and the points poked through his back. Blood quickly swelled around the wound and Brian dropped his former self to the floor.

Good, good! Look at yourself in the mirror now Bri-boy, Asshole McScary said in his thoughts.

Any glint of his former self in his eyes were gone. White grease paint covered his exposed skin and a large red bulb sat perched on his nose. His hair looked dirty orange and his *Green Day* shirt had faded colored stripes running up and down his body.

Looking good my man. Why you look almost like me now Bri-boy!

Brian stepped in front of a mirror and inspected his body. Bile rose up in his throat and doubled over to vomit.

Again? Really? Suck it up, you're not done yet. You need to find that Polly bitch and finish what you started.

The mirrors around him faded to darkness and he was left alone again. His friends disappeared and something stirred within him.

"What have I done?"

He looked down at his gloved hands and made a fist. Pushing harder, he drove the pointed fingertips deep into his palm and felt a slick wetness. Closing his eyes, he pictured their faces at their moment of death. The people who stood by him through thick and thin, the friends he counted on, and the family they shared was dead.

"This ends now," he muttered and ripped the gloves from his hands.

What are you doing Bri-boy?

"I'm going after Polly and then we're walking the fuck out of this shithole," Brian said defiantly and picked up the wooden mallet again.

This should be good, the clown chuckled and grew silent. For the first time since they arrived, he didn't feel Asshole McScary lurking in his head anymore.

"Polly, we're going home," Brian muttered and began to destroy the mirrors with the mallet.

Chapter Thirteen

Julianne Snow

Polly and Sandy wandered around the midway looking for their friends – the ones still alive anyway. Both nervous, they looked at everyone with caution, wondering who was going to strike out at them if they got too close.

Noticing Brian enter the funhouse off to the left, they tried to follow but the crowd wouldn't part for them. No matter how hard they tried, the two girls kept getting pushed further and further away in the opposite direction.

"Let's go back to the beginning and see if we can enter the funhouse from its exit? It was right by the Freak Show and it's obvious that all these rude people are being jackasses!" Polly said the last part of her sentence in a raised tone, shooting dirty looks at the blank faces with glazed eyes around her.

"Are you sure we'll be able to get through? No one seems to want to move at all. It's so weird…" Sandy looked around her again, before pushing her mouth closer to Polly's ear. "It's like they're not letting us pass on purpose."

Polly grabbed Sandy's hand and started to pull her in the direction of the Freak Show. The crowd moved with them, funnelling them forward. The raucous noise of the carnival whirled all around them, until the din became all they heard, the sounds reverberating inside their skulls.

"Polly, you okay? Polly?" Her body crumbled to the popcorn and trash littered ground before Sandy could stop it. "Shit Polly! Why'd you have to go and do that?"

***

After breaking all of the mirrors in the funhouse, Brian felt a little bit better about what he had to do. He was going to save Polly and Sandy, and get away from this fucking carnival once and for all. Then he'd see about burning it to the ground. None of these freaks, with their mind games and disgusting proclivities should be allowed to harness more souls to do their dirty work.

Leaving the carnage of the funhouse behind, he walked out into the artificial light of the carnival. The milling crowd parted down the centre and he could hear the clown in his head, telling him he still had one chance to redeem himself.

I'm glad that's over Bri-boy, but you destroyed my mirrors. No worry, I can get more… Time to get a move on it, they're waiting for you at the Freak Show! the clown hissed in his ear, causing Brian to shudder reflexively.

Nothing about the situation promised good things for him if he didn't look like he was going to comply, so he squared his shoulders and traversed the parted crowd.

That's a good boy… Go to them. Kill them. Do as I say and I'll let you leave. If you want to, of course. You may decide to stay when you get to see the fruits of your labour. There was something about Asshole McScary that grated at his nerves, but he needed to find Polly and Sandy. If the clown wanted to help him without knowing it, so be it.

***

Polly came to in a room she didn't recognize. With her hands bound above her head, she panicked, twisting her body to the left where she could see Sandy in much the same condition. Whispering, she tried to get her friend's attention, "Sandy!"

Sandy looked over at her, relief passing across her face as she answered. "Thank God you're awake! You fainted and I asked this guy from the crowd to help me. I know I shouldn't have done it, but what else was I going to do? He helped me bring you to the first aid tent and the next thing I know, I'm waking up here. How could I have been so stupid?"

"Don't blame yourself Sandy, you couldn't have known we'd end up like this." Polly tried to be reassuring, all the while wondering how her friend could have been so stupid. "Can you get down? Unhook yourself at all?"

"I've tried. I'm pretty much stuck like this. What about you? Can you get free?"

Polly looked above her head to the hook which held her bound hands. Seeing the point of the hook facing backward, she tried to move her bindings up and over it. Try as she might, she couldn't get enough height to make it over the last inch of rusted metal. "Fuck! I'm not tall enough!"

"Neither am I…" Sandy started to cry, sagging slightly into the straps until the pain of her weight on her wrists snapped her back to full height. "I'm losing the feeling in my arms Polly, that can't be a good sign right?"

"It's not something we can worry about now. We have to figure out a way to get out of this and find Brian. Where are we anyway? There's not much light in here…"

"Freaks of Fantasy. You can see the sign just above the exit – or at least I can. I think that exhibit is blocking your view."

"What the fuck are freaks of fantasy anyway?"

"I'm not sure. From what I can see there are all kinds of chairs and booths set up around the room. This must be the exhibit for the weirdest of the weird."

"I take exception to that young lady."

The strange voice came from behind, making them both scream in fright. Neither of them had anticipated anyone else being in the room and were equally unprepared for the parade of individuals who came to stand in front of them.

"May I introduce the Freaks of Fantasy?" The invitation came from a very tall man wearing a roughly hewn and threadbare tweed suit with matching top hat. He held a thin cane topped with the head of an elephant and wore a monocle over his left eye. While debonair to a certain degree, he looked right at home in the dinginess of the interior's half-light.

He stood there looking at them for a few moments, the invitation displayed by the sashay of his cane. The longer he waited for them to answer, the more anxious the girls became. "I'll take that as a yes then, shall I?"

Sandy and Polly nodded in unison, hoping their acquiescence might buy them enough time to figure something out.

"On my right is *the* Dragon Man, but you can call him Virgil – born of normal parents, his body is covered in thick scales. I'd let you touch them but you seem to be tied up at the moment." From the shadows a drum toned a familiar *ba-dum-dum*. "He's also got a set of wings that would make any angel jealous, his tail is marvelous when not hidden away, and he breathes fire better than anyone else I know."

The girls stared in wonder as Virgil stretched his wings out and flapped until he hovered a foot off the ground.

"Beside Virgil is Philomena – she was born with four legs, and two wombs. Those are her kids around her. Can you believe she was pregnant with little Henry and little Horatio at the same time? But they're not twins, oh no! Hell, they don't even have the same father! Say hello Philly!"

Philomena waved and performed the most awkwardly beautiful curtsey in the history of man.

"On my right here, is Dr. Theltch. Just watch what he can do…" Upon being introduced, the doctor took a step forward and stuck out his left arm. With his right hand, he grabbed onto the skin of his upper arm and pulled. The skin stretched more than a foot before he let it snap back into place.

"Amazing, isn't it?" As the doctor stepped back into line, the tall man who had been presenting his show stepped forward.

"Now I'd like for you to direct your attention to my left." Both girls turned their heads to the left, searching the shadows for another freak of fantasy. "Not your left girls, my left. Doesn't anyone follow direction anymore?"

Both girls turned to the other direction and noticed a giant tank for the first time, set up against the wall. They could see the sides were made of glass but their eyes couldn't penetrate the murky depths in the insufficient light. The first flicker of movement behind the glass caused them both to jerk back, their wrists paying for the scare.

"Feast your eyes ladies on the star of our little attraction. She likes to call herself Ariel but her real name is Brenda. She's got one fantastic tail on her, I can tell you that! Splash us, baby!"

A dark green fin broke the surface and sent water flying in their general direction. Polly ended up drenched while Sandy was lucky enough to escape the deluge of dirty water. Still looking at the tank, both girls flinched as its interior lights turned on, stunning them with the vision of Brenda submerged beneath the surface. The skin of her neck rippled and Polly spoke first.

"Holy shit, she has gills!"

"Yes my dear, that she does. It helps her to breathe in her aquatic home."

"Is she a real mermaid?" It was Polly again, her curiosity winning out over the fright of her predicament.

"Why yes my dear, what else would she be?" The tall man answered with a jaunty smile upon his lips.

"That is so fucking cool!"

“So what’s your fantasy Mister?” It was Sandy who spoke the last question aloud.

“What’s my fantasy you ask? Well I for one would love to see what your insides look like, but we can’t always have what we want, can we?” He smiled a wicked little smile as he shot Sandy a sideways glance. “But in all seriousness, my name is Roderigo Castaval and I am a satyr.”

“What the fuck is a satyr?” It was Polly who asked the question.

“Half man, half animal.”

“Yes my dear, that’s absolutely correct. My mother was a bit non-discriminant and as a result, I’m half man and half ostrich.”

“So you’re trying to tell us your mother had sex with an ostrich? Is that even possible?” Polly spoke again, a quizzically disbelieving look on her face.

“My dear, of course it’s not meant to be possible, but my mother was a pioneer in her field of research. And it was just my luck she used herself as the test subject.” Roderigo paused for a moment, the devilish look coming back to his face. “I just wish I could figure out how to stop the urge to stick my head in the sand all the time.” The drum kit in the back thumped again.

Polly couldn’t help the laughter from bubbling up. Once she started, she couldn’t stop and the act of it enraged Roderigo.

“Laugh it up honey, you’ll get what’s coming to you. That’s certainly for sure. Come now my darlings, let’s leave these two to their fate.” Roderigo turned and started to walk away, his homely freaks turning in unison with him. “You too Brenda, time for you to dry off a bit.”

Brenda placed both hands on the edge of the tank and hoisted herself upward. Both Polly and Sandy watched her tail swing over the side, transforming into the most beautiful set of legs either of them had ever seen.

Smiling coyly, Brenda winked. “It’s all the swimming. Keeps me in shape.” Blowing them a kiss, she sauntered off through the flap, joining the rest of the fantastical freaks in their exit.

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“What the fuck what that?”

“I’ve got no idea Polly, but we have to get out of here! If only the others could find us!”

“There are no others.”

“Brian!” Both Polly and Sandy screamed his name at the same time.

“Hello ladies! We don’t have much time okay. Let me see if I can get you down.” Brian instinctively went to Polly first, even though she was the furthest away from the flap he’d entered.

“Oh My God Brian, I am so happy to see you!”

“Yeah Brian, I’m so glad you found us.” The deadpan of Sandy’s reply made both Brian and Polly turn to look at her.

“Well, well, well Brian. We finally get to meet your luscious little Polly.” Both Polly and Brian turned their attention from Sandy to the other voice who’d entered the conversation. “My, my, my, my, my! I can certainly see why you wanted her all for yourself. Damn girl, you’re hot!”

“Uhhh, thanks. I think.”

“Don’t you fucking talk to her!” Brian moved his body so that he now stood between the clown and Polly, shielding her from his view.

“C’mon Brian. We’re friends aren’t we man? You killed for me, now I get to kill for you. Her blood would look so good on my hands; you’ve got to admit it!”

“You lay one finger on her and I’ll rip your throat out. I swear to God I will!”

“There’s no God here Brian – can’t you see that?” Asshole McScary had a point, but Brian had no intentions of admitting anything to the psychopath before him. “Okay, since we’re friends, lemme give you one last choice.”

The clown waited for Brian to weigh his options.

“It’s a one-time offer my friend and it expires in ten seconds…”

“What is it?” Sandy asked the question Brian couldn’t.

“Ahh, the lady speaks. Well Sandy… It is Sandy right?” McScary stopped until Sandy nodded up and down, “Brian here has one choice. He’s killed all of your other friends but doesn’t want to finish the rest of the job. He’s got it into his head he doesn’t need to join us, that he can simply walk away and forget about all of the people he killed tonight.”

“You did what Brian?” The look on Polly’s face when he turned to face her was devastating. He hadn’t wanted her to find out but now that the cat was out of the bag…

“Do you remember what happened to us in Freaks of the Mind? Well it scrambled my brain for a bit and it made me do horrendous things. But I have control back now. I don’t want to kill anyone else. I swear!”

Sandy laughed, hysteria breaking the surface.

As she chuckled to herself, the clown continued, “So your choice is simple: Polly or Sandy?”

Brian looked at Asshole McScary, confusion marring his normally attractive face. “I don’t get what you mean?”

“It’s simple, Bri-boy. I will let you walk out of here with either Polly or Sandy. Make you choice, time’s ticking away for one of them.”

“What happens to the one I don’t choose?”

“She dies like the others. In some horrific way I will certainly enjoy.”

Brian looked between the three people in the room, trying to figure a way out of the impossible situation. Not coming up with any solution, he looked back at the clown and flatly stated, “Polly. I choose Polly.”

Polly started to cry as Sandy continued to laugh. Brian shot a look in her direction, shame evident upon his face. “I’m sorry Sandy, but I love Polly.”

“Shut the fuck up you coward. Just go and leave me to die, you asshole!”

Brian didn't spare her another moment as he turned and lifted Polly's bound hands high enough to clear the pointed hook. Grabbing one of her hands, he made to leave the tent, his eyes never leaving the clown's face.

Suddenly Polly pulled back, her grasp slipping from his. As he turned, he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Wrong choice asshole!" Sandy held Polly from behind in a choke hold. A long knife glinted in the sparse illumination from the tank, dangerously close to Polly's slender neck.

"Don't do it Sandy! You're free now! We can take this clown no problem! We can all escape…"

Asshole McScary started to laugh. So did Sandy.

"You don't get it do you Brian. You chose wrong and now Polly has to die." A quick flick of the knife across the pale canvas of her skin produced a river of crimson that flowed forth. Brian ran to Polly as Sandy released her, his hands trying to staunch the flow that kept coming. Within seconds, Polly was a lifeless lump in his arms and with defeat, he crumbled to the ground.

"Guess her blood looks just as good on your hands, Bri-boy!"

"Shut up Kelly! God, don't you know when to stop?" Sandy shot a menacing look at the clown before continuing, "I made you, so I can destroy you. Got it?"

"Yes." The answer was quiet, almost demure.

Brian looked up at the pair, "I don't understand."

"Where did we lose you Brian?" Sandy's face was a mask of cruelty, her upper lip snarled and her eyes cold. "You chose wrong. End of story."

"But why? How?"

"Let me make it simple for you. My family owns this carnival and I'm the one in charge of harvesting souls to work it. I look for the lost, the easily pervertable and I twist them into what I can use. I guess I misjudged you."

"Misjudged me? What do you mean?"

"C'mon Brian, I saw the way you looked at me my first day of school. The sly little look that came into your eyes when I sat down next to you. You wanted me and I could tell. That was when I decided you'd be a perfect playmate to replace Kelly here. He was fine for a while but I never seemed to be able to tear him away from those mirrors… Such vanity! But you Brian, you were someone I thought I could use.

"But then Polly started dropping hints she wanted to be more than friends and you followed her like she was a bitch in heat. God Brian, you were so stupid! Look where that got you?"

"But-"

"I'm not finished talking!" Sandy waited for Brian to close his mouth before she continued. "I thought I could get you back, but apparently I was wrong. Such a waste of time Brian, such a waste of time."

Sandy stood over him, shaking her head in disappointment. Brian figured he had one last kill in him, figured he could take out the one person who had turned him into a killer.

"C'mon Brian, do you really think you can kill me?" Sandy practically chuckled the entire question. "Kelly, call the police will ya? I need to report a few murders."

When they were alone, Brian looked up at Sandy, "You won't get away with this. The police will figure it out."

"Bri-boy, all the blood is on your hands. On your clothes," she paused for a moment to let it sink in. "Besides, my family is loyal to a fault. Haven't you ever heard what they say about Carnies?"

As if in cue, the chorus of freaks echoed "We only have each other."

Afterword

If you've just read this book, we'd like to thank you for purchasing a copy of *The Carnival 13*. When the idea came to us, we knew donating the proceeds to a great cause was the right thing to do. And when we found *Scares That Care!*, it was like a match made in heaven.

From the *Scares That Care!* website:

Scares That Care! is an IRS approved 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides money, toys and other items to help sick children. We have two other programs consisting of *Scares For Pairs*, where we help women fighting breast cancer; We also have partnered with horror icon Kane Hodder, and we created the *I Helped Kane* program, where we provide assistance to those children who have suffered serious burn injuries.

Led by horror film director and retired police officer Joe Ripple, this benefit will utilize the fan base of the horror, haunt and Halloween genres to raise funds and awareness for those in need. We plan to have a GREAT time holding benefits, by showing films, having silent auctions and maybe getting lucky enough to have a few celebrity appearances along the way. Our success depends upon YOU.

Won't you please help us make someone's dream come true? Come on, Horror Fans! Unite for a common cause! WE ARE AN ALL VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATION, WHICH MEANS THAT 100% OF YOUR DONATION GOES TO THOSE WHO NEED IT!

All of the proceeds from the sale of *The Carnival 13* will be donated to *Scares That Care!* and each of the authors within has donated their time and talent for this worthy charity. Thank you for helping us to give back in more ways than one.

Julianne, Brent, and Jason
SAD House Press

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Brent Abell resides in Southern Indiana with his wife, sons, and a pug who devours the souls of those who dare to enter his carnival. He slaves away full-time, but has been published in or have tales coming out from over twenty presses and eZines. *In Memoriam,* his debut novella is temporarily out of print, but will be returning soon.

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Jason Darrick

Although Jason Darrick is no longer writing for publication, The Carnival 13 remains one of his proudest efforts. Jason is now mainly focused on creating interesting, fun and horror-centric videos and short films. To keep up with Jason and all of his future works please follow him on Twitter @SemiRetGoths & and visit his YouTube page at YouTube.com/SemiRetiredGoths.

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Dan Dillard lives in the Midwest, eats pizza and Oreos whenever possible, and takes two things seriously: Writing and Halloween. So you shouldn't find it odd that most of his tales are of the horror variety. Oh, and he has a wife and kids and he loves them, too.

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